DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 445 CE 075 360

AUTHOR	Brown, Amy; Bloom, Dan; Butler, David
TITLE	The View from the Field: As Time Limits Approach, Welfare Recipients and Staff Talk about Their Attitudes and Expectations. The Cross-State Study of Time-Limited Welfare.
INSTITUTION	Manpower Demonstration Research Corp., New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY	Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.; Joyce Foundation, Chicago, IL.; Ford Foundation, New York, NY.; Mott (C.S.) Foundation, Flint, MI.
PUB DATE	1997-10-00
NOTE	87p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; Demonstration Programs; Economically Disadvantaged; Employment Programs; Federal Legislation; Job Training; Public Policy; State Programs; *Welfare Recipients; *Welfare Services; *Work Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS	*Welfare Reform

ABSTRACT

A study examined time limits from the perspectives of welfare recipients and line staff in welfare agencies. Data on time-limited welfare were drawn from staff surveys and from group and individual interviews with both staff and recipients in selected locations in Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin during the first half of 1996. Findings indicated most recipients valued self-sufficiency and wanted to work. They identified such barriers to employment as the need for support services, low wages of available jobs, lack of skills, and family or personal problems. For the most part, both staff and recipients supported the concept of a time limit on welfare receipt. Many recipients expressed concern, however, that a fixed time limit was too rigid to account for individual circumstances and would end up hurting some families. Contrary to perceptions of some staff, recipients were generally aware of the time limits and believed they were real. Recipients did not raise the subject of time limits on their own but, when asked, rated their anxiety as high. To varying degrees, staff in all three states felt that the time limit had helped to create a sense of urgency and to change the focus and content of their jobs. Most recipients said that the time limit did not play a central role in shaping their actions. Recipients tended to view the time limit as a one-time deadline for leaving welfare. (An appendix describes background, methodology, and participant characteristics.) (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

CE

ED 414 445

The Cross-State Study of Time Limited Welfare

The View from the Field:

As Time Limits Approach, Welfare Recipients and Staff Talk About Their Attitudes and Expectations

Amy Brown
Dan Bloom
David Butler

MDRC

October 1997

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J S Greisman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CE 073 360

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

RICHARD P. NATHAN, *Chairman*
Provost, Rockefeller College
State University of New York
Director, Rockefeller Institute
of Government

PAUL H. O'NEILL, *Treasurer*
Chairman and CEO
Alcoa

ELI GINZBERG, *Chairman Emeritus*
Director
The Eisenhower Center for the
Conservation of Human Resources
Columbia University

MARY JO BANE
Professor of Public Policy
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University

REBECCA M. BLANK
Professor of Economics
Northwestern University

ANTONIA HERNANDEZ
President and General Counsel
Mexican American Legal Defense and
Educational Fund

ANNA KONDRATAS
Senior Associate
Urban Institute

RICHARD J. MURNANE
Professor of Education
Graduate School of Education
Harvard University

RUDOLPH G. PENNER
Managing Director
Barents Group

ROBERT REISCHAUER
Senior Fellow
Brookings Institution

ROBERT SOLOW
Institute Professor
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

GILBERT STEINER
Senior Fellow
Brookings Institution

MITCHELL SVIRIDOFF
Professor Emeritus and Senior Fellow
Community Development Research Center
New School for Social Research

WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON
Malcolm Wiener Professor of Social Policy
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University

JUDITH M. GUERON
President
Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation

MDRC

The Cross-State Study of
Time-Limited Welfare

The View from the Field:

As Time Limits Approach, Welfare Recipients and Staff Talk About Their Attitudes and Expectations

Amy Brown
Dan Bloom
David Butler

MDRC

October 1997

Manpower Demonstration
Research Corporation

The development, production, and distribution of this report were supported by the funders of the Cross-State Study of Time-Limited Welfare: the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

Dissemination of MDRC reports is also supported by our Public Policy Outreach funders: the Ford Foundation, the Ambrose Monell Foundation, the Alcoa Foundation, and the James Irvine Foundation.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

Copyright © 1997 by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation

Contents

Preface v
Acknowledgments vi

Chapter

1 Overview, Key Findings, and Policy Lessons 1

I. Background 2
II. The Programs Discussed in This Report 3
III. Early Impacts from Florida's Time-Limit Program 5
IV. Key Findings in This Report 12
V. Conclusions and Policy Implications 16

2 Recipient Perspectives 19

I. Welfare and Work 20

A. Attitudes Toward Welfare 21
B. Attitudes Toward Work 22
C. Perceived Barriers to Work 23

II. Time Limit 26

A. Understanding the Time Limit 26
B. Attitudes Toward the Time Limit 27
C. Concern About the Time Limit 29
D. Responses to the Time Limit 30
E. The Time-Limit Message 31

III. Policies That Accompanied the Time Limit 33

A. Understanding the Policies 33
B. Views About Incentives and Services 33
C. Welfare "Diversion" Policies 34

3 Staff Perspectives 36

I. The Data Used in This Chapter 36

A. Staff Surveys 37
B. Staff Interviews 37

II. How Time Limits Were Affecting Staff Attitudes and Activities 38

A. How Time Limits Are Expected to Affect Welfare Staff 38
B. How Staff Were Affected 39

III. How Staff Presented the Time Limit to Recipients 46

IV. How Staff Thought Recipients Were Responding 50

V. How Staff Viewed Their States' Time-Limit Policies 54

Appendix 58
Selected Publications on MDRC Projects 66

Tables and Figures

Table

1.1	Time-Limited Welfare: Key Features of the Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin Pilot Programs at the Time They Were Studied	6
1.2	Time-Limited Welfare: Key Incentives, Mandates, and Services Implemented in Conjunction with the Time Limit in the Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin Pilot Programs	8
1.3	Time-Limited Welfare: Selected Characteristics of the Program Locations	10
3.1	Responses to Selected Questions About How Florida and Vermont Eligibility Workers Were Affected by time Limits	40
A.1	Selected Characteristics of Vermont Sample Members Who Participated in Focus Group and Telephone Interviews and All Single-Parent Recipients	62

Figure

1.1	Time Frame of Program Operations and Data Collection for the Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin Programs Studied in This Report	11
3.1	Employment and Training Strategies: Views of Employment and Training Workers in Vermont	43
3.2	How Staff Have Discussed the Time Limit with Clients in Florida's Family Transition Program	47
3.3	How Staff Have Discussed the Time Limit with Clients in Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project	48
3.4	Employment and Training Strategies: Views of Employment and Training Workers in Escambia County, Florida	51
3.5	Staff Perceptions About Clients' Responses to the Time Limit in Florida's Family Transition Program	52
3.6	Staff Perceptions About Clients' Responses to the Time Limit in Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project	53
3.7	Staff Perceptions of the Time-Limit Policy in Florida's Family Transition Program	55
3.8	Staff Perceptions of the Time-Limit Policy in Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project	56

Preface

Time limits are a new and therefore largely unstudied approach to welfare reform. Despite this lack of experience, the expectations are great. Proponents suggest that time limits will motivate recipients to become self-sufficient, change welfare to a system of temporary assistance, and help curtail broader social problems. Critics argue that large numbers of recipients will be unable to achieve self-sufficiency and that they — and their children — will be seriously harmed by the policy.

What will be the effect of time-limited welfare? Because so few people across the country have actually reached a time limit, the answer is still unknown. However, the experience of the three states studied in this report — Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin — can offer some insight. These three states introduced time-limit policies early on, and welfare recipients in two of the states have begun to reach the limits.

This is the second report in the Cross-State Study of Time-Limited Welfare. The first report described the different approaches of the three states to time limits and some of the issues they encountered in the early implementation of the policies. This report looks at recipient and staff attitudes towards time-limited welfare in the three states. This "street level" view of the policies is critical because line staff are responsible for conveying the time limits' "sense of urgency" to welfare recipients, and because recipients are the ones who are expected to respond to the policies.

The first report found that the three states all implemented time limits as one piece of a more comprehensive welfare reform strategy. The views expressed in this report confirm that time limits are only one of the factors influencing how staff and recipients view the changing welfare system and how they respond to welfare reform policies.

Many staff say that time limits have helped to reorient their jobs toward the goal of helping recipients become self-sufficient, but they also note that other reform policies and other elements of their work environments can exert an equally strong influence.

Meanwhile, interviews and discussions with 100 current and former welfare recipients — conducted when these individuals, had they received welfare continuously since the time limits were implemented, would have used up at least half of their allotted time on welfare — found relatively few people who said their behavior had been dramatically influenced by the existence of the time limit; the participants were more focused on day-to-day issues that confront low-income single mothers. Many were working or preparing for work, but said they would have been doing so with or without the time limit. Of course, recipients' perspectives may change as they move closer to the time limits, but the views expressed in this report — along with recent evaluation findings from Florida — suggest that administrators and policymakers should not assume that time limits will automatically spur dramatic changes in behavior before people actually reach the limits.

Judith M. Gueron
President

Acknowledgments

This report could not have been completed without the support and assistance of numerous people at MDRC, in the participating states, and at the foundations that are funding the Cross-State Study.

The project's funders have been actively involved in this project from its inception. The following people reviewed a draft of the report and offered many thoughtful suggestions: Michael Laracy (Annie E. Casey Foundation), Ron Mincy (Ford Foundation), Unmi Song (Joyce Foundation), and Jennifer Phillips (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation).

Special thanks to the state administrators who facilitated their states' participation in the project and reviewed a draft of the report: Don Winstead (Florida), Sandra Dooley and Roy Haupt (Vermont), and Jean Rogers, Jean Sheil, and Margaret McMahon (Wisconsin).

At the local level, many people helped arrange the focus groups and staff interviews. We would particularly like to thank Shirley Jacques, John Bouldin, and Jerry Walters (Escambia County, Florida); Craig Comstock (Barre, Vermont) and Bonnie Crowe-Oddy (St. Albans, Vermont); and Roger Kautz (Fond du Lac, Wisconsin).

At MDRC, Judith Gueron and Gordon Berlin reviewed a draft and offered many helpful comments, and Judith Greissman edited the report. Linda Duffy arranged the focus groups. Jo Anna Hunter-Manns analyzed the staff surveys with assistance from Jennifer Cooper. Lara Fabiano assisted in reviewing the focus group transcripts and survey responses, and Alison Green-Parsons produced the demographic tables. Rachel Hitch fact-checked the report. Patt Pontevolpe and Stephanie Cowell did the word processing and created the tables and figures.

Wendy Bancroft of the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation developed the moderator's guides and led the focus groups in Florida and Vermont.

Finally, we owe a debt of gratitude to the current and former welfare recipients who participated in the focus groups and telephone interviews, and to the line staff who completed surveys and spent time with us discussing their experiences.

The Authors

Chapter 1

Overview, Key Findings, and Policy Lessons

The emergence of welfare time limits represents a dramatic change in the way cash assistance is provided to poor families — particularly families headed by single mothers. Proponents of this policy see time limits as the next logical step in a long series of changes designed to reduce long-term welfare receipt and make welfare more transitional; they argue that limits will create a "sense of urgency" that will motivate recipients to find jobs and become self-sufficient, and also that curtailing welfare receipt will alleviate social problems that are seen as linked to welfare. Critics maintain that many welfare recipients will be unable to find stable employment, and that removing cash assistance will therefore cause serious harm to large numbers of poor children.

In fact, no one knows how time limits will affect either the behavior and well-being of families or the level of government spending on welfare and other programs for the poor. Several rigorous studies are currently assessing the impacts, benefits, and costs of state time-limit programs, but it is too early to draw any firm conclusions because the state programs are still relatively new.

To help fill this knowledge gap, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) developed the Cross-State Study of Time-Limited Welfare. Funded by private foundations — the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation — the Cross-State Study is examining the early implementation of some of the first state-initiated programs that included welfare time limits — programs in Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin. The purpose of the study is to draw some preliminary lessons from the states' experiences with this new policy approach.

This report, the second in the Cross-State Study, examines time limits from the "street level" perspectives of welfare recipients and line staff in welfare agencies. It describes how welfare agency staff say time limits are affecting their day-to-day work, and how recipients say they are responding to the new "message." The data are drawn from staff surveys and from group and individual interviews with both staff and recipients in selected locations in Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin during the first half of 1996. The data for this report were gathered during a unique period in the programs' history — after time-limit policies had been implemented but when few, if any, people had reached a time limit. The attitudes of both staff and recipients, and their response to time limits, may be very different after more families begin to reach the "cliff" and uncertainty about what will happen (for example, whether benefits will in fact be terminated or whether families will receive extensions of the time limit) begins to fade.

This report does not provide definitive answers to the questions it addresses. Rather, it is intended to identify topics that need further examination and to provide insight to states that are just beginning to implement time limits about what they might expect to encounter in the first

years of the new policy. Furthermore, because the data come from surveys and interviews, they represent what people *said* about the time limits rather than providing information on how they actually responded. Separate reports from full-scale evaluations of two of these programs will provide more information about both the implementation and impacts of time limits. Early findings from MDRC's evaluation of Florida's program are summarized later in this chapter, and an early implementation and impact report on Vermont's program is scheduled for early 1998.

This report is divided into three chapters. This introductory chapter provides background information on the three programs studied and presents the key findings in this report. Chapter 2 looks at the programs from the perspective of current and former welfare recipients who are or were subject to the time limits. It is based on focus group discussions and telephone interviews with 99 individuals in Escambia County (Pensacola), Florida; Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin; and Barre and St. Albans, Vermont, in early 1996. Chapter 3 looks at the programs from the perspective of line staff. It includes data from interviews with staff in all three states and surveys of approximately 200 workers in Vermont, and in Escambia County, Florida.

I. Background

The roots of welfare time limits can be traced to a gradual erosion of public support for providing long-term cash assistance to able-bodied single mothers. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) — originally called ADC, Aid to Dependent Children — was created in the Social Security Act of 1935 to assist children who had been deprived of the support of one of their parents; at the time, these were mostly children living with widowed mothers. The program was not designed to promote employment because its target population was generally not expected to work.

Over the past six decades, as mothers entered the workforce in large numbers and the size and composition of the AFDC caseload changed, public support for the original vision of AFDC declined. Thus, for nearly 30 years, federal and state policymakers struggled to shift AFDC from an open-ended income support program to a program that promotes employment and self-sufficiency while at the same time continuing to further two other popular goals: supporting poor children and containing costs. In the 1970s and 1980s, policymakers sought to balance these often conflicting goals by redefining AFDC as a quid pro quo: Government would provide income support and services to promote employment, but recipients in turn would be required to work or participate in activities that prepared them for work. Recipients who failed to comply with these mandates would have their grants reduced. This approach was reflected in the federal Family Support Act of 1988, which for the first time required states to ensure that specific proportions of AFDC recipients were participating in work-related activities through the newly created Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) Program.

Although careful evaluations have shown that welfare-to-work programs such as those operated under JOBS can simultaneously increase work, reduce welfare receipt, save money for

taxpayers, and make participants somewhat better off financially,[1] many people were dissatisfied with the pace of change in the years after the Family Support Act passed (which coincided with a recession that contributed to large increases in welfare caseloads in many states). Thus, during his 1992 Presidential campaign, then-candidate Bill Clinton promised to "end welfare as we know it" by requiring welfare recipients to work after two years on the rolls. Although President Clinton's proposal never passed, his pronouncements helped spur a flurry of activity in the states. Between 1993 and 1996, the Administration permitted 43 states to undertake welfare reform experiments under waivers of federal rules. A total of 31 of these waivers included some version of a time limit in at least part of the state, although many states defined the term quite differently than the President had: Rather than requiring recipients to work when they reached the time limit, these states proposed to end assistance at that point.

After the 1994 mid-term elections, Congress began to consider new welfare legislation that included large reductions in spending on several programs for low-income people and a fundamental change in the structure of welfare. Eventually, in August 1996, the President signed a bill that replaces AFDC with a block grant to states, ends the legal guarantee that assistance will be provided to all eligible families, and requires states to have a high percentage of their caseload participating in work activities, among other changes. The legislation, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, gives states vast new flexibility in redefining welfare but also imposes new restrictions, including a restriction on using federal funds to provide assistance to most families for more than a total of five years. The Act allows the use of state dollars to provide assistance to individuals after five years, and also permits states to impose time limits that are shorter than five years without having to obtain federal approval.

Although states across the country are now making decisions about whether to implement time limits and what they will look like, there are still many questions about how this approach will affect families and taxpayers. Early time-limited welfare programs, such as the Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin initiatives discussed in this report, provide an important preview of the issues that are likely to emerge in other states over the next few years.

II. The Programs Discussed in This Report

This report examines programs in Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin, three of the earliest states to receive waivers to implement versions of a welfare time limit.[2] The first report in the Cross-State Study, released in late 1995, examined the three states' policies in detail and identified some of the early issues that emerged as these policies were put in place.[3]

A brief description of each program follows:

---

[1]See, e.g., James Riccio, Daniel Friedlander, and Stephen Freedman, *GAIN: Benefits, Costs, and Three-Year Impacts of a Welfare-to-Work Program* (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1994).

[2]Vermont's waivers were granted in April 1993; Wisconsin's in November 1993; and Florida's in January 1994.

[3]Dan Bloom and David Butler, *Implementing Time-Limited Welfare: Early Experiences in Three States* (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1995).

- **Florida's Family Transition Program (FTP)** began operating in two mid-sized counties in February 1994.[4] Under FTP rules, most families are limited to 24 months of cash assistance in any 60-month period. Certain groups of particularly disadvantaged recipients are limited to 36 months in any 72-month period. Cash benefits are terminated at the time limit (although recipients who are deemed to have complied with program rules and are unable to find a job despite diligent efforts will be provided with subsidized private or public work opportunities). Recipients may also receive up to two four-month extensions of the time limit under certain conditions. FTP includes a range of enhanced services, including intensive case management, expanded funding for child care and other support services, and generous financial work incentives. Recipients subject to FTP are required to participate in employment-related activities through Florida's JOBS program, Project Independence, during the pre-time-limit period.

- **Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project (WRP)** began operating statewide in July 1994. WRP sets time limits of 30 months for welfare cases headed by single parents and 15 months for two-parent cases. Upon reaching the time limit, recipients must work (single mothers with children under age 13 are required to work part time; others must work full time). The state is committed to providing paid community service jobs to those who reach the time limit and cannot find jobs on their own. Participation in Reach Up, Vermont's welfare-to-work program, is voluntary for single parents until two months before the time limit, at which point they must participate in a job search activity. WRP also includes expanded financial incentives to work.

- **Wisconsin's Work Not Welfare Program (WNW)** began operating in two small counties in January 1995.[5] Under WNW, families were limited to 24 months of cash assistance in a 48-month period, followed by 36 months of ineligibility. Cash benefits were to be terminated at the time limit, although some families would have been eligible for vendor shelter payments after the time limit to prevent homelessness of children. Prior to reaching the time limit, recipients were required to work or participate in work-related activities; their grants were reduced by the hourly minimum wage for each hour they missed without good cause.

---

[4]FTP was later expanded to seven additional counties. In October 1996, Florida's Work and Gain Economic Self-Sufficiency (WAGES) program was implemented statewide. WAGES shares some of FTP's features, but differs in other ways. FTP is continuing to operate in Escambia, one of the original pilot counties.

[5]WNW was discontinued in February 1997. The two WNW pilot counties are now operating W-2 (Wisconsin Works), a statewide welfare reform initiative that was modeled in part on WNW.

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 further describe the three state programs; Table 1.1 displays the key features of the states' time-limit policies, and Table 1.2 describes some of the policies that have been implemented along with the time limits. Table 1.3 describes the locations where the programs operated during the study period and where data for this report were collected.

In the spring and summer of 1996, when the data were collected, the Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin time-limit programs were still at a relatively early stage in their operation. In all three programs, recipients' time-limit "clocks" began to run when they were enrolled into the new program. For new welfare applicants, this occurred as soon as they began receiving benefits. The process was somewhat different for those who were already receiving welfare when the time-limit programs began. These individuals were phased into the programs over time, usually when they appeared for a semi-annual interview to recertify their welfare eligibility.[5] Any months in which they had received welfare prior to that point were not counted toward the time limit.

As shown in Figure 1.1, the three programs began operating in 1994 and early 1995; thus, at the time data for this report were collected, very few people had reached time limits. In Vermont, where two-parent families are subject to a 15-month time limit, small numbers of such families who received welfare continuously for 15 months after enrollment began to reach the time limit in late 1995. The first single-parent cases in Vermont (families subject to a 30-month time limit) reached the time limit in early 1997. In Florida, a few families began to reach the time limit in early 1996 — those who entered the program in early 1994, were assigned a 24-month time limit, and received welfare for 24 continuous months. No recipients had exhausted their benefits in Wisconsin, since the program had been operating for fewer than 24 months when the data for this report were collected.

It is also important to note that Vermont is a state with no large urban areas, and the Wisconsin program operated in two small counties. In both cases, there was a relatively strong labor market and a homogeneous population; these environments are probably not typical of the locations where most welfare recipients in the United States are concentrated. This fact should be considered in assessing the findings described in subsequent chapters.

III. Early Impacts from Florida's Time-Limit Program

As discussed earlier, this report provides insight into some of the issues that the three states have encountered (and other states are likely to encounter) in implementing time limits on welfare. The report deals with staff's and recipients' attitudes toward and reactions to the time limits. Larger evaluations of the programs in Florida and Vermont will provide more information about both the implementation and impacts of the states' policies.

---

[5] In both Vermont and Florida, only a portion of the people who appeared for a recertification interview were enrolled into the new program; this was done to control the flow of participants into the new programs. In addition, in both of these states, some applicants and recipients were randomly assigned to groups that did not enter the new programs. Members of these "control" groups will be compared over time to recipients who entered the programs in order to assess the impact of the programs.

Table 1.1

Time-Limited Welfare: Key Features of the Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin Programs at the Time They Were Studied

Feature	Florida's Family Transition Program	Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project	Wisconsin's Work Not Welfare[1]
Time limit	24 months in a 60-month period for most recipients.	30 months for single-parent families.	24 months in a 48-month period, followed by 36 months of ineligibility, for all non-exempt recipients.
	36 months in a 72-month period for specific disadvantaged groups.	15 months for two-parent families.	
Consequences of reaching the time limit	Cash benefits end.	Recipients are required to work; the state provides community service jobs when necessary. Eligibility for cash assistance continues.	Cash benefits end for 36 months.
		Recipients who fail to comply with the work requirement are placed in "money management"; the state takes over responsibility for managing their grant money. Recipients who fail to comply with money management reporting requirements may have their grants canceled.	
Policies for extensions and exemptions from the time limit	Certain categories of recipients are exempt from the time limit (e.g., over age 62, disabled or incapacitated, caring for a disabled relative).	Certain categories of recipients are exempt from the work requirement (e.g., age 60 or over, disabled or incapacitated, caring for a disabled relative).	Certain categories of recipients are exempt from the time limit (e.g., over age 60, disabled or incapacitated, caring for a disabled relative).
	Time limits are suspended during periods of high unemployment.	Work requirement may be temporarily postponed to allow for completion of certain education programs.	Extensions may be granted on a case-by-case basis with approval of the state program manager under unusual conditions (e.g., the recipient is disabled or has significant limitations to employment, or local labor market conditions preclude a reasonable job opportunity).
	Review Panel of representatives from the community may recommend individual extensions under certain conditions.	Required work hours may be reduced for recipients making satisfactory progress in an education program.	

(continued)

Table 1.1 (continued)

Feature	Florida's Family Transition Program	Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project	Wisconsin's Work Not Welfare[1]
State policies for recipients whose benefits are terminated as a result of the time limit	State will provide work opportunities for recipients who are unable to find jobs despite diligent efforts.	Former recipients are eligible for non-cash benefits, such as food stamps.[2]	Family may receive vender shelter payments if the children are threatened with homelessness.
	Child's portion of the grant is retained if complete termination is likely to result in the child's being placed in emergency shelter or foster care.		Children's Services Network offers referrals for services that provide food, clothing, medical attention, etc.
	Former recipients are eligible for non-cash benefits, such as food stamps.[2]		Former recipients are eligible for non-cash benefits, such as food stamps.[2]

[1]The Work Not Welfare pilot was discontinued in February 1997.

[2]Individuals who are disabled may receive benefits through the federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Program if they meet that program's eligibility criteria.

Table 1.2

Time-Limited Welfare: Key Incentives, Mandates, and Services Implemented in Conjunction with the Time Limit in the Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin Programs

Program Component	Florida's Family Transition Program	Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project	Wisconsin's Work Not Welfare[1]
Incentives	Expanded and extended disregard of earned income ($200 plus one-half of remaining earnings).	Expanded and extended disregard of earned income ($150 plus one-quarter of remaining earnings).	Extended disregard of earned income.
	Recipients permitted to accumulate more assets and own more valuable cars.	Recipients permitted to accumulate more assets and own more valuable cars.	
	Restrictions on eligibility for two-parent families are eliminated.	Restrictions on eligibility for two-parent families are eliminated.	Restrictions on eligibility for two-parent families are reduced.
		Child support is paid directly to the family.	Child support is paid directly to the family.
			Food stamps are "cashed out" and provided, along with cash welfare, in a single grant.
			Family cap provision denies benefits for children conceived while their mothers receive welfare.
Mandates	Narrower exemptions from JOBS participation mandate.	Two-parent cases required to participate in JOBS. Single-parent cases required to participate beginning two months before reaching the time limit.	Narrower exemptions from JOBS participation mandate; recipients are required to earn their benefits through participation in education, training, or work.
	Recipients are required to speak with school officials, ensure that their children are attending school regularly, and prove that preschool children have necessary immunizations.[2]	Minor parents are required to live at home or in an approved setting.	Learnfare program requires teenagers in families receiving welfare to attend school.[3]

(continued)

Table 1.2 (continued)

Program Component	Florida's Family Transition Program	Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project	Wisconsin's Work Not Welfare[1]
Services	Expanded funding for JOBS and support services (e.g., child care) for JOBS participants.	Expanded funding for JOBS and support services (e.g., child care) for JOBS participants.	Expanded funding for JOBS and support services (e.g., child care) for JOBS participants. A Community Steering Committee helped develop jobs for participants.
	Transitional child care for those who leave welfare for work is extended from 12 to 24 months.	Transitional child care for those who leave welfare for work is available as long as income remains below the state median.	Priority for low-income child care subsidies is given to those exhausting transitional child care eligibility.
		Transitional Medicaid for those who leave welfare for work is extended from 12 to 36 months.	More flexible rules for transitional Medicaid.
	Enhanced case management services.		
	Continued education and training for participants who have found jobs and gotten off welfare.		Enhanced case management services; social workers are assigned to "at-risk" families.

[1]The Work Not Welfare pilot was discontinued in February 1997.
[2]The immunization mandate applies only to applicants.
[3]Learnfare is a statewide program implemented in 1987; if teenagers do not attend school, their family's grant may be reduced.

Table 1.3

Time-Limited Welfare: Selected Characteristics of the Program Locations

Demographic Characteristic	Florida's Family Transition Program		Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project		Wisconsin's Work Not Welfare[1]	
Locations of program operations	Alachua and Escambia Counties		Statewide		Fond du Lac and Pierce Counties	
Population, 1990	Alachua County:	181,596	State:	562,758	**Fond du Lac County:**	**90,083**
	Escambia County:	**262,798**			Pierce County:	32,765
Population of largest city, 1990	Alachua County (Gainesville):	84,770	Burlington:	39,127	**Fond du Lac County** (Fond du Lac):	37,757
	(Gainesville Metro Area):	204,111	(Burlington Metro Area):	137,079	Pierce County (River Falls):	10,610
	Escambia County (Pensacola):	58,165				
	(Pensacola Metro Area):	344,406				
Approximate AFDC caseload when program operations began	Alachua County:	4,000	State:	10,000	**Fond du Lac County:**	**700**
	Escambia County:	**6,000**			Pierce County:	200
Family poverty rate, 1989 (%)	Alachua County:	14.4	State:	6.9	**Fond du Lac County:**	**5.6**
	Escambia County:	**13.3**			Pierce County:	6.2
Nonwhite population, 1990 (%)	Alachua County:	22.5	State:	1.4	**Fond du Lac County:**	**1.5**
	Escambia County:	**23.4**			Pierce County:	1.2
Unemployment rate, May 1995 (%)	Alachua County:	2.9	State:	3.8	**Fond du Lac County:**	**3.7**
	Escambia County:	**4.7**			Pierce County:	2.8

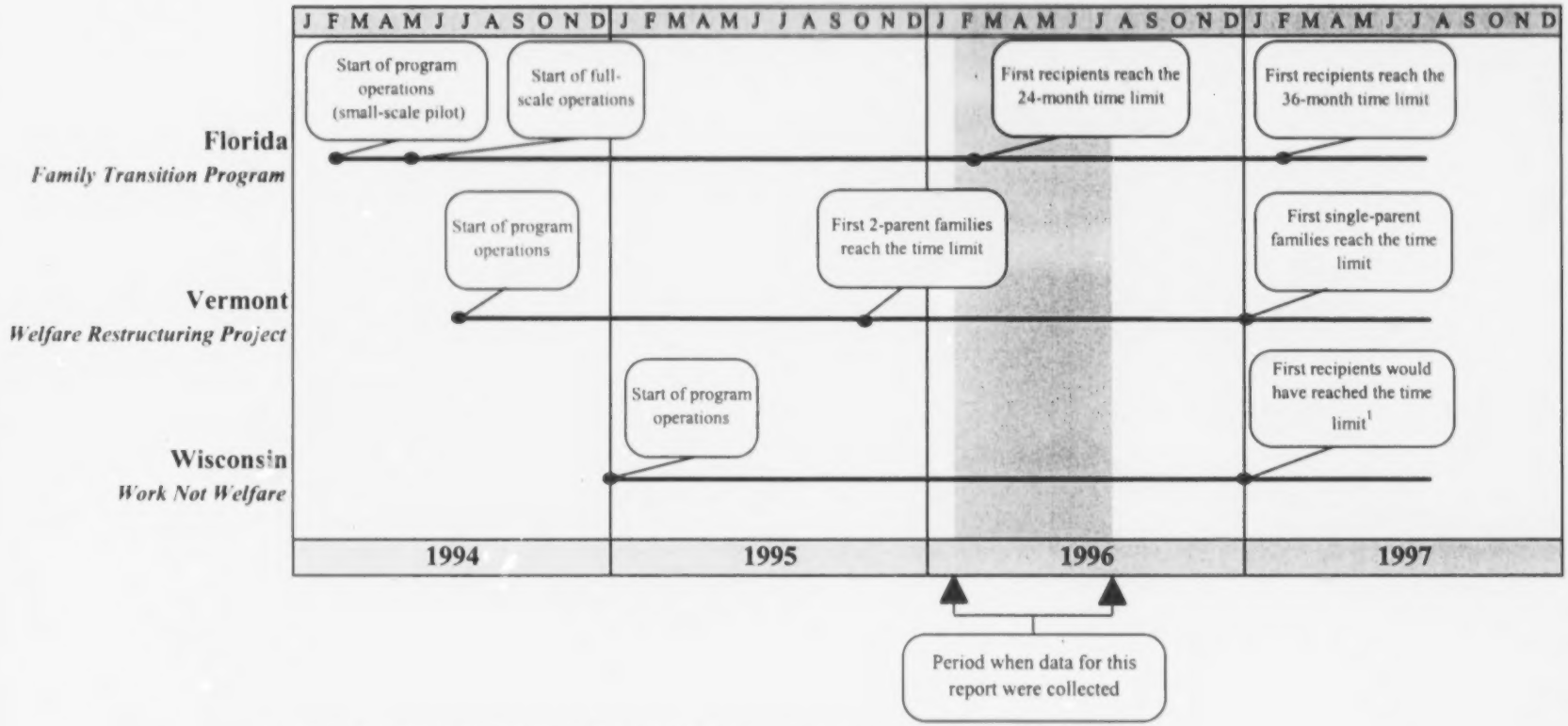
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, *1994 County and City Data Book*; U.S. Census Bureau, *State and Metropolitan Area Data Book*, 1991; and Bureau of Labor Statistics. Florida data on the average monthly AFDC caseload were provided by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (now the Department of Children and Families). Wisconsin data were provided by the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services. Vermont data were provided by the Vermont Department of Social Welfare.

Notes: The data for this report were collected in Escambia County, Florida, and Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin (shown in bold). In Vermont, staff surveys were conducted in six locations (Barre, Burlington, Newport, Rutland, St. Albans, and Springfield); focus groups and telephone interviews with current and former AFDC recipients were conducted in Barre and St. Albans.

[1]The Work Not Welfare pilot was discontinued in February 1997.

Figure 1.1

Time Frame of Program Operations and Data Collection for the Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin Programs Studied in This Report


J F M A M J J A S O N D J F M A M J J A S O N D J F M A M J J A S O N D J F M A M J J A S O N D
Florida
Family Transition Program
Start of program operations (small-scale pilot)
Start of full-scale operations
First recipients reach the 24-month time limit
First recipients reach the 36-month time limit
Vermont
Welfare Restructuring Project
Start of program operations
First 2-parent families reach the time limit
First single-parent families reach the time limit
Wisconsin
Work Not Welfare
Start of program operations
First recipients would have reached the time limit[1]
1994
1995
1996
1997
Period when data for this report were collected

Note: [1]The Work Not Welfare pilot ended before any recipients reached the time limit.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A recent report on MDRC's evaluation of Florida's Family Transition Program presents early information on the program's impacts and complements the findings in this report.[7] As does this report, the Florida impact results focus on the pre-time-limit period — i.e., they cover only 15 to 18 months after each person's entry into the study, not long enough to track people to the point where they could have reached the time limit. During this early period, the combination of FTP's time limit, enhanced services, and financial incentives generated statistically significant increases in employment and earnings — i.e., recipients subject to FTP were more likely to be working than those in a control group subject to traditional AFDC rules. The increases in employment and earnings, however, were not dramatic: At the end of the report's follow-up period, 46 percent of those in the FTP group were employed, compared with 40 percent of those in the control group. Thus, it appears that FTP had not, at least in the short term, caused large numbers of recipients to find employment, above and beyond the level of employment attained by the control group. It is important to note, however, that FTP placed many participants into education and training activities that may have kept them out of the labor market temporarily.

In addition, the report found that FTP had neither increased nor decreased rates of AFDC receipt; in other words, people in the FTP group and the control group were accumulating months of AFDC receipt at the same rate. On the one hand, FTP's generous financial work incentives — which allow people to earn more without losing eligibility for welfare — were increasing family income without causing welfare caseloads or spending to increase. On the other hand, FTP was not causing people to leave welfare more quickly in order to save their available months for the future. As noted earlier, several key features of FTP — such as its financial incentives for work and its focus on education and training — are not necessarily designed to hasten welfare exits. The finding is also not surprising given the statements of welfare recipients interviewed for this report. As discussed below, few recipients said the time limits pushed them to leave assistance more quickly than they otherwise would have.

IV. Key Findings in This Report

This report examines time-limited welfare from the perspectives of current and former welfare recipients and line staff in welfare agencies. Although the views of recipients and workers were both diverse and complex, some general conclusions are possible:

- **Most recipients said that they valued self-sufficiency and wanted to work, but they identified a number of barriers to employment.**

Both current and former welfare recipients made it clear that they valued work and self-sufficiency and felt stigmatized by being on welfare. They also made it clear, however, that they were grateful for the welfare system as a safety net that provided for their families through difficult times. Furthermore, they recognized the trade-offs — financial and other — between welfare

[7] See Dan Bloom, James J. Kemple, and Robin Rogers-Dillon, *The Family Transition Program: Implementation and Early Impacts of Florida's Initial Time-Limited Welfare Program* (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1997).

and work and spoke of the difficulty of finding lasting employment that would make them fully self-sufficient. The fact that many of those on welfare were working but had incomes low enough to still receive partial welfare benefits highlights this challenge. Current welfare recipients cited the need for support services, the low wages of available jobs, lack of skills, and family or personal problems as barriers to employment.

All three states implemented other policies in conjunction with time limits that were intended to address some of these barriers. For example, child care and transitional medical assistance were available to all those who left welfare for work. But the recipients who cited such concerns did not always know about these services or felt they were inadequate.

- **For the most part, both staff and recipients said that they supported the concept of a time limit on welfare receipt. Many recipients expressed concern, however, that a fixed time limit was too rigid to account for individual circumstances and would end up hurting some families.**

In surveys and interviews, staff in all three programs overwhelmingly supported the concept of a time limit as their state had defined it. A few staff in Florida and Wisconsin expressed concern that the policies might harm recipients who had serious physical or emotional problems, but most workers believed that relatively few recipients were at serious risk.

Most of the current and former recipients who participated in focus groups or telephone interviews also felt that it was fair to limit the amount of time people could receive welfare; they strongly believed that people should support themselves rather than relying on welfare for long periods, and they believed that some recipients took advantage of the system. At the same time, many recipients said that a fixed time limit was too rigid to account for individual circumstances and would hurt some families who had legitimate reasons for needing welfare assistance for a longer period. Some recipients also believed that the time limit would be implemented in a way that would end up penalizing people who needed welfare most, while those who "gamed" the system would find a way to maintain their benefits.

- **Contrary to the perceptions of some staff, recipients were generally aware of the time limits and believed that they were real; often, however, they did not know the specific details of the policies.**

Almost all of the interviewed recipients were aware that there was a time limit on their benefits, and almost all understood that the message of time limits was that they needed to find a job and get off welfare. Few expressed skepticism that they would in fact be cut off assistance if and when they reached the time limit. Many, however, were confused about how the time limit clock worked and even the date when they would reach their time limit. Without that detailed understanding, the time limit presented a general concern for these individuals but not a clear deadline for action.

In contrast, staff suggested that many recipients did not believe that the time limit would be implemented as planned, and, for that reason, were not strongly motivated by it.

- **Findings on recipients' concern about time limits were contradictory: They did not raise the subject on their own but, when asked, rated their anxiety as high. Many recipients seemed naively confident about their ability to become fully self-sufficient, while others were passive or seemed unable to prepare for the time limit.**

When asked, many recipients rated their anxiety about the time limit as high, and the anxiety level generally rose as the discussions progressed. Yet, the time limit was not mentioned in any of the focus groups or telephone interviews until the facilitator or interviewer introduced the subject. The upcoming time limit on their benefits was neither at the forefront of participants' minds nor a primary factor influencing what they were currently doing. (This may change as recipients begin to reach time limits in the three states.) Instead, they were likely to be either continuing a path off welfare that they had initiated without regard to the time limit or focusing on other, more immediate life issues.

Asked what they would do if they reached the time limit, many recipients seemed naively confident about their ability to become fully self-sufficient, even though they had long histories of welfare receipt, had repeatedly been in and out of the labor market, or listed multiple barriers to employment. Others were passive, suggesting that somehow things would work out even though they could not foresee a path to self-sufficiency within the time frame of the time limit.

- **To varying degrees, staff in all three states felt that the time limit had helped to create a sense of urgency and to change the focus and content of their jobs. Time limits were only one of the factors, however, that stimulated this change.**

In all three states, welfare eligibility workers — the primary point of contact between recipients and the system — said that they were focusing more on employment-related issues and less on narrow eligibility issues in their day-to-day interactions with recipients. For most workers, this was a welcome change. Employment and training workers said that the time limit put pressure on them to ensure that participants became employed before they reached the limit. Both types of workers said that the time limit forced them to focus more clearly on a specific goal and a specific time frame for achieving it.

Although these changes were important, it is difficult to determine the extent to which they were driven by the time limit per se. Reductions in caseload size, staff training, and the other employment-related policies that have been implemented along with time limits have a large bearing on staff roles and attitudes.

- **Despite this new urgency, staff in the three programs sent different messages to recipients — reflecting the different programs' goals — about**

how to prepare for and respond to the time limits; staff did not necessarily urge recipients to leave welfare as quickly as possible.

The three programs not only defined the time limit differently, they also implemented different work-focused policies in the pre-time-limit period. In Vermont, single-parent recipients are not required to participate in employment activities until just before the time limit; until that point, the activities focus heavily on post-secondary education and other skill-building activities. Wisconsin had tough, immediate participation requirements and a focus on rapid employment or short-term training. Florida is in the middle — participation is mandatory, and the emphasis is mixed, with substantial amounts of education and training available.

Staff in the three programs also interpreted the time limit differently, offering different advice to recipients. In Wisconsin, staff frequently urged recipients to leave welfare quickly in order to "bank" their available months. This approach was less common in Florida and Vermont, where staff were equally likely to urge recipients to use the available time to obtain training or education. It is also important to note that most staff, particularly in Florida and Wisconsin, spent little if any time discussing the possibility of extensions to the time limit. Staff felt that this might decrease participants' motivation to find jobs on their own.

- **Most recipients said that the time limit did not play a central role in shaping their actions. Among the few who said that their behavior had been affected by the time limit, most said that it had pushed them to further their education, not necessarily to leave welfare quickly.**

As they described their situations and motivations, recipients made it clear that their lives were very complex and filled with multiple pressures. Those pressures pulled them in different directions — working, going to school, caring for their children and other family members, dealing with medical or legal problems, etc. In the here and now, these other issues seemed to matter more than the time limit in shaping their activities and their movement off welfare.

Most current recipients said that the time limit had not affected their behavior – that they were already motivated and striving to the best of their ability to get off welfare. Similarly, very few of the people who had left welfare said that the time limit had affected their decision to do so. These findings are consistent with the early impact results from the Florida Family Transition Program evaluation discussed above: The time limit appears to have had little effect in hastening people's movement off welfare during the pre-time-limit period.

A few recipients suggested that the impending time limit had pushed them to go to school or to finish school or get a job more quickly than they otherwise would have. The time limit seems to have had the greatest impact on those going to school, by encouraging them to either get more education or to rethink their course of study or their time frame for completing their education.

- **Recipients tended to view the time limit as a one-time deadline for leaving welfare. They often planned to use up all their time on welfare preparing for self-sufficiency, without considering whether they might need to return to welfare in the future.**

None of the programs had a lifetime limit on welfare receipt, but the time was measured cumulatively in all three — i.e., separate periods on welfare were added together in determining how many months a family had received assistance. Many focus group participants, like many other welfare recipients, described histories of multiple spells of welfare receipt, interspersed with employment or other means of support. In Wisconsin, in particular, staff counseled welfare applicants and recipients to make use of any other available options in order to save their limited time for when they would need it most.

Despite their histories of repeated welfare spells, recipients seemed to view getting off welfare as a one-time event, and viewed the time limit as the amount of time they had in which to do so. The few recipients who planned around the time limit — in particular, those in school, but also those attempting to become self-employed or those dealing with personal issues — planned their activities by using the time limit as a final deadline. This is consistent with other research conducted in Florida, which suggests that some recipients may adopt the time limit as their personal time frame for leaving welfare, rather than trying to leave earlier.[8] Few focus group participants talked about the need to get off welfare *quickly* because of the time limit or of the importance of saving their months of welfare eligibility for future use.

V. Conclusions and Policy Implications

This report addresses the questions: How does the presence of a time limit affect the attitudes and activities of welfare recipients and line staff in the short term, before people reach the limit? Does the impending time limit motivate people to look for jobs? To get education or training to prepare for work? To leave welfare quickly in order to "save" their limited months of eligibility? How do time limits affect the operations of the welfare system and the attitudes and perceptions of line staff? In assessing the findings presented here, it is important to recall that the discussions with staff and recipients occurred at an early point in the programs' operational lives, when few, if any, recipients had used up their allotted months and reached the time limits.

These questions are important because the success of welfare reform initiatives that include time limits will likely hinge on the extent to which welfare recipients become self-sufficient and leave welfare *before* they reach the time limit. This is one reason why the three programs in this study have implemented time limits along with other services, incentives, and requirements designed to help recipients prepare for, find, and hold jobs. But past research suggests that these companion policies are not likely to generate dramatic results by themselves. Thus, the states hope that the existence of the time limit will bolster the policies' impacts by creating a sense of increased urgency among recipients. They expect that this atmosphere will be

[8]See Bloom and Butler, cited above.

created through the day-to-day interactions between welfare recipients and line staff – the subject of this report.

It is difficult to draw broad policy lessons from discussions with small groups of people who are not necessarily representative of the broader welfare population. Nevertheless, the information presented in this report is suggestive and offers some tentative conclusions, as well as some lessons for these three states and for others that are preparing to implement time limits.

- **Simply imposing time limits is not enough**. The findings in this report, as well as the early Florida results discussed briefly above, suggest that the existence of a time limit will not necessarily spur recipients to quickly move off welfare before they reach the end of assistance. While recipients will eventually be forced to leave the rolls as they reach their time limits, the success of the policy depends on recipients becoming self-sufficient before that point. It is for that reason that each of the three states discussed here implemented time limits along with other programs and services designed to help recipients move to self-sufficiency. The challenge is to integrate the various program elements, so that they reinforce each other.

- **Programs need a clear message.** Programs need to have a clear message for staff to transmit. Should staff encourage recipients to leave welfare and "bank" their available months, or to use the time to invest in their "human capital"? There are pros and cons associated with each strategy, but the recipients interviewed did not seem to fully understand the options that were available to them within their state's policy. Staff need guidance to help recipients think through these issues. How should staff present the possibility of extensions or post-time limit work-based assistance in their discussion with participants? Again, while it is not clear what the best strategy is, an inconsistent, garbled message is not helpful.

- **Communication is key.** Many participants in the focus groups and interviews did not understand the details of their state's time-limit policies and so did not have a firm deadline for action. Others did not seem to be aware of the services available to help them move to self-sufficiency. Through both staff contact and written materials, programs need to provide clear explanations of the time-limit policy, to reinforce this message constantly over time, and to make sure that recipients understand the services that are available to help them overcome barriers to employment.

- **Translating the message into action is critical.** The discussions with current and former recipients suggest that a time limit can create a generalized sense of urgency, but that many recipients have difficulty translating this into a specific, short-term strategy for moving to self-sufficiency. Many were understandably focused on day-to-day problems and concerns, and many seemed to lack long-range planning skills. This suggests that line staff are critical inter-

mediaries, who need to help recipients translate the time-limit message into concrete, immediate steps toward self-support.

- **How best to respond to time limits is not always clear.** In addition to general guidance, staff need to give recipients good advice about complicated issues. Should recipients use the available time to invest in upgrading their skills or try to leave welfare quickly in order to stop the clock, potentially delaying achievement of their educational goals. How can recipients balance short- and long-range planning so that day-to-day concerns and crises do not divert them from their path? These issues are far more complicated and nuanced than the tasks that welfare eligibility workers have traditionally been expected to perform. Many employment and training workers have addressed some of these kinds of issues as they work with recipients to design and implement employability plans, but the presence of a time limit raises the stakes.

- **Staff need training and support in their new roles.** Several prerequisites probably need to be in place if staff are to be expected to succeed in their new roles. First, a high priority must be placed on staff training. Workers obviously need to understand the substance of the policies they are implementing, but they may also need broader training so that they can motivate recipients and provide the kind of advice described above. Second, staff need logistical support. They need user-friendly management information systems that allow them to accomplish their core eligibility or recipient tracking responsibilities efficiently and quickly so that they have more time to spend with recipients. The management information systems also need to allow both eligibility and employment and training workers to track individual recipients' time-limit clocks easily. Easy-to-understand written materials and audiovisual aids may be needed to help explain policies to recipients. Caseload sizes must be manageable.

- **Policies and program structure need to be consistent with the message.** Finally, the program's policies and its staffing structure need to be consistent with its message. For example, if the goal is to move people off welfare as quickly as possible, strong job search/job placement services need to be in place. If there is a strong focus on skill-building activities, the services themselves must be of high quality and must be structured to fit within the time-limit time frame. Staff cannot effectively communicate a message that the program itself does not support.

In short, the findings presented in this report, along with the early findings from Florida's Family Transition Program, reinforce a central conclusion from the first report in this series. Time limits can accomplish some useful objectives, but also pose new challenges and cannot alone be expected to move many recipients to self-sufficiency. In fact, the presence of a time limit magnifies the need for effective work-focused strategies and places even more importance on the day-to-day reality of program implementation.

Chapter 2

Recipient Perspectives

In February and March 1996, MDRC conducted focus groups with 51 individuals who had received welfare or were currently receiving welfare in Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin. All were single parents subject to time limits under the states' policies. Separate groups were conducted for individuals who were on welfare at that time and for those who were no longer receiving welfare. MDRC conducted telephone interviews with an additional 48 individuals, both on and off welfare, to confirm and reinforce the findings from the focus groups. In all, the researchers spoke with a total of 99 individuals: 40 in Florida, 39 in Vermont, and 20 in Wisconsin. Based on those discussions, this chapter examines time-limited welfare from recipients' perspectives.[1]

The purpose of the focus groups and telephone interviews was to learn about participants' attitudes toward a time limit on welfare and to hear their accounts of how the time limit affected their plans for self-sufficiency. In addition, participants were asked about their attitudes toward welfare and work in order to shed light on their motivations and perceptions of the trade-off between welfare and work. The researchers were also interested in learning whether there was any difference in these respects between participants who were still on welfare and those who had left, or among participants in the three states.

Although most participants were aware of the time limit on their benefits, it was not at the forefront of their minds. Participants were most focused on daily challenges such as raising their families and making ends meet. At the same time, most were either already off welfare or taking steps to get off, for example, by working part time or going to school. Almost all said that they would have been taking those steps even in the absence of time limits. Participants spoke in strong terms about their aspirations for employment and self-sufficiency, and of the stigma and low self-esteem that went with their being on welfare. Overall, participants said that they were concerned about time limits, but most also said that they expected to be self-sufficient by the time their benefits ended.

This chapter examines these views in greater detail. Section I discusses participants' attitudes toward welfare and work and their reported barriers to self-sufficiency. Section II explores participants' attitudes toward and reported responses to time limits. Finally, Section III discusses their perspectives on the policies that accompany time limits in each state.

The focus group discussions were wideranging, and participants seemed at ease and spoke freely; the group dynamics sometimes sparked heated discussions and topics unanticipated by the researchers. The telephone interviews supported the focus group findings, but they were

[1]The Appendix describes the structure of the focus groups and telephone interviews, the process through which participants were selected, and the characteristics of participants, and looks at how the participants in one state — Vermont — compared with a larger sample in that state's evaluation.

necessarily shorter and involved mostly contained answers to specific questions. For that reason, the quotations used in this chapter are almost exclusively from focus group participants. The general impressions cited and the attempts to measure responses — for example, when a perspective is attributed to "some" or "most" participants — are also based largely on focus groups and less on the telephone interviews.

I. Welfare and Work

The focus groups and telephone interviews began by asking participants to describe their attitudes toward welfare and toward work — attitudes that, the researchers assumed, would shape participants' perceptions of the trade-offs between welfare and work and thus influence their responses to time limits. Another motive for starting the discussions this way was to hear whether participants would themselves raise the subject of time limits — an indication of how prominent it was in their minds.

Participants' attitudes toward welfare were markedly similar, regardless of where they were from or whether they were on or off welfare. The primary responses were highly emotional and negative; participants talked about stigma, lack of privacy, and low self-esteem. However, participants also spoke of the importance of having a safety net to support their families through difficult times. Some participants also regarded welfare as an opportunity to stay home with their children or to further their own education.

Attitudes toward work were also two-sided, though the positive and negative aspects were more intertwined. Virtually all participants made it clear that they valued work and self-sufficiency above a life on welfare. Most echoed a Florida participant who said: "I never wanted to be on welfare all my life. I mean, I always wanted to work."[2] At the same time, however, participants were quick to point out the financial trade-offs of welfare and work, as well as the difficulties of being a single parent juggling work and family. Those on welfare offered a variety of reasons why they could not find employment that would make them self-sufficient. These included support service needs, labor market issues, and family or personal problems. While most participants were interested in trying to overcome those barriers, some seemed clearly overwhelmed by the challenge.

The information presented in this section is not new — previous research has found similar attitudes among welfare recipients.[3] Yet, this is a notable finding, given how much the

---

[2]In quoting participants, extraneous phrases, such as "you know," have been removed for ease of reading. In addition, clarifying statements are sometimes included in brackets. However, no words have been altered, and care has been taken to preserve the accuracy and intent of participants' comments.

[3]See, e.g., LaDonna Pavetti, *Learning from the Voices of Mothers: Single Mothers' Perceptions of the Trade-offs Between Welfare and Work* (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1993); Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, *"It's Not Like They Say": Welfare Recipients Talk about Welfare, Work and Education* (Washington, D.C., 1992); and Wendy Bancroft and Sheila Currie Vernon, *The Struggle for Self-Sufficiency: Participants in the Self-Sufficiency Project Talk About Work, Welfare, and Their Futures* (Vancouver, B.C.: Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, 1995).

welfare programs have changed in the past few years. In each of these states, time limits and other policies — such as work requirements and financial incentives — have been introduced to shift the balance in the trade-off between welfare and work.

A. Attitudes Toward Welfare

The two most common themes that arose in discussions of welfare were stigma and lack of privacy. Speaking about stigma, participants typically responded:

> Shame.
>
> Humiliation.
>
> Low self-esteem.
>
> People look down on you.
>
> It just makes you feel less of a person, in a way.

One participant said that welfare means "having to be treated like a lower life form, just because you are not as fortunate as other people." Participants also discussed public perceptions and stereotypes of welfare recipients. One focus group member said: "They look at people on welfare as people that are too lazy to get out and go to work. That's not true."

Lack of privacy and bureaucratic hassles were equally common complaints, especially of those who had left welfare and perhaps more in Florida and Wisconsin than in Vermont. For example, one participant complained that "if you get a check from your parents for your birthday for fifty bucks, you've got to report that to them. I don't think that's right. Or if you're living with somebody until you can get on your feet, which happened to me, they wanted their income, their social security. That's none of their business." Although many participants told stories of negative experiences with the welfare bureaucracy, however, others did not have such experiences and most acknowledged that "it depends on your worker."

In all three states, but especially in Vermont, several parents expressed concern about the impact of welfare on their children. Some said that their children did not want other children to know that the family received welfare. Some also worried that they were setting a poor example for their children by being on welfare. Roughly half the participants in a Vermont focus group did not even tell their children that the family received welfare.

Despite their initial negative responses, however, participants in all of the focus groups, when asked, were able to identify positive aspects of being on welfare. Mostly, participants saw welfare as a means of survival through tough times. Many told how they had applied for welfare after losing a job, becoming divorced, or experiencing some other crisis. One participant summed it up this way: "I'm kind of glad it's there for me, because I didn't ask for my situation to be as it is, and it's getting me through it, be it as it may. I don't like it any more than anybody else does, but it's a way for me and my kids to survive." Gratitude for the safety net was equally strong

among those who were no longer receiving welfare. As one participant explained: "Without it [welfare], I wouldn't have had a chance to start over and get out of a bad situation." Another said: "To me it's like a lifeline . . . because if welfare weren't there, then I don't know where I would be and where my children would be."

Another positive aspect of being on welfare, for several participants, was the opportunity to go to school. As described in the Appendix, more than one-third of focus group participants who were on welfare reported that they were in school (though a few also worked at the same time). One participant described welfare as "a chance to get into a career that means something to you, so that you can mean something in your life instead of just having to take any job to get by." Another explained: "I didn't want to be on it to start with, but since I did, it helped me through school. . . . I'll be finished with school in a few months and then I'll be off."

Finally, a few participants described welfare as a way of staying out of the labor market to be with their children. For example, one participant said of welfare: "It gives you the chance, if you just had a baby, to stay home with it, where you might not if you had a job." Other parents described ongoing problems with teenage children who had been arrested or were in trouble at school. The participants were preoccupied with addressing those problems and felt strongly that things would become even worse if they were not at home.

B. Attitudes Toward Work

In many ways, participants' attitudes toward work presented the flip side of their attitudes toward welfare. Where stigma and lack of privacy were the predominant characterizations of welfare, working represented independence, pride, and acceptance in the community. Below are some typical responses to the question of what working means:

Self-respect.

Accomplishment.

Being self-sufficient.

I can rely on myself and don't need anybody to take care of me.

One participant elaborated: "You feel better about yourself . . . because you're cashing a check that you worked for instead of getting one on the first and fifteenth that you didn't." Another participant explained: "I just think it is very important to be self-sufficient. I am a mother. It is my choice that my son is here, so it's my responsibility to take care of him. It's not anybody else's, it's mine." Describing the privacy that comes with self-sufficiency, one participant said that working meant the "freedom to have my own life to myself, where I don't have to account for the fact that I drive a certain vehicle . . . or how I spend my money." The removal of stigma was also frequently cited. One participant who had recently begun working said that "now I feel like people are looking at me like I'm their equal."

Most participants who were working and off welfare reported that working brought them financial gain.[4] Participants described being able to buy brand name products, build savings, even buy a car. Often, parents thought of the extra money in terms of their children. One participant explained: "Now I'm working, I can afford things my children want."

Not all those who worked were better off financially, however. A Vermont participant who was off welfare said that even though she was working, "I don't earn any more than I did when I was on welfare." A participant from Fond du Lac who had left welfare for work agreed: "I can't say the money is better, because I'm still struggling." However, most of those who were working and off welfare — even those who were worse off financially — preferred their situation to being on welfare. As one participant explained: "We feel better about ourselves. . . . Even though we have less money, we have earned it ourselves."

It is also important to note that many participants who worked still received partial welfare grants. As a Florida participant pointed out, even if someone works, "you're not necessarily independent from welfare."

In contrast, participants who were not working — and especially those who were in school — frequently cited the financial trade-off between welfare and work. For many of them, education represented a route not just to employment but also to self-sufficiency. One participant said that she had decided to go to school because "I realized that nowadays if you don't have an education . . . you might end up finding a job that pays you what, $5, $6 an hour. That's not enough to support a family." Some suggested that an emphasis on quick employment was shortsighted. For example, a participant described her situation this way: "I'm a full-time student finishing up my degree this summer. . . . The welfare system wants me to go to work in McDonald's instead of finishing my education."

Another common concern among participants who were not working involved giving up their role as sole caretaker of their children. One participant characterized the trade-off between welfare and work this way: "Making $800 a month is not that much different than making $600 a month. You know being on welfare you suffer a little bit more, but you're not spending 40 hours a week away from your home." Other participants completed the sentence "Working means . . . " in the following ways:

No time with your kids.

Having somebody else raise your kids.

Working to me means neglecting your children.

While none of the parents who were off welfare made such strong statements about neglecting their children, several noted the challenge of being a single parent juggling both work

[4]In fact, many studies have found that single mothers who find jobs and leave welfare often experience little improvement in their financial situation. See, e.g., Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997).

and family. One said that working means "a lot of stress because of the time crunch." Another complained that "I'm just tired when I get home. . . . I get cranky with the children because I'm tired. I mean, that's not good." In general, they missed having more time for their families, but had made a decision that the benefits of working — and the importance of working — outweighed those concerns.

Furthermore, some participants felt that their working was beneficial for their children. For example, one participant suggested that "I think it did my daughter some good to go to day care because I think she learned a lot, and I think it's important socially for her to be among other children." Several participants said that they believed working made them more positive role models for their children. One participant elaborated: "I want my son to realize that money doesn't grow on trees and that you just can't stop working just because the state's gonna give you money. . . . I want him to know that working is a thing that has to be done. It's not a choice." Another participant proposed that "your kids will have respect for you" if you are working.

C. Perceived Barriers to Work

In order to understand the factors that participants felt kept them from becoming self-sufficient, the researchers asked those on welfare: "Why don't you go out and get a job tomorrow that will take you off welfare?" (It should be noted that many of those on welfare were working at least part time.) The answers were consistent across the three states and fell into three categories: support service needs, labor market issues, and family or personal problems.

1. Support service needs. The most common employment barriers cited had to do with the need for support services to enable parents to go to work, and the most common need cited was child care. As one participant responded: "I have two words: day care. It is so hard to find affordable, good day care." Concern about child care was widespread despite the fact that child care assistance was available to individuals making the transition from welfare to work in all three states (see Table 1.2). Some participants seemed unaware that such assistance was available. Others were more concerned about finding care that was high quality and that they could trust. One spoke from experience: "It's real hard to get good day care, get someone you know to leave your kids with where you don't have to worry." Other parents specifically complained about the quality of child care subsidized by the welfare department. As one explained: "There are good day cares, but the best day cares are not under this program."

Transportation was another barrier commonly cited by participants:

I don't have a car, number one.

Not everybody lives on a bus route.

A lot of jobs are not on the bus line.

Having a car did not necessarily solve the problem. Participants noted the costs of "vehicle maintenance . . . gas, oil, tires, normal repairs."

For several parents, the prospect of losing medical assistance stood out as their greatest concern about leaving welfare for work. As one participant explained: "That was one of the reasons I stayed on it to begin with, because my kids had so much medical problems. I couldn't live without it because I couldn't pay the medical bills or get them in to see a doctor." These parents seemed unaware that individuals leaving welfare for work are eligible for transitional Medicaid benefits (see Table 1.2), and that some children may be eligible for Medicaid under other criteria even after transitional Medicaid ends.

Finally, several participants noted that they did not have appropriate wardrobes for many jobs. This issue came up in almost all of the focus groups, although it was usually mentioned near the end of the list of barriers. Participants argued that "you got to have clothing" in order to get a job, and that "if you're on welfare, you sure don't have a wardrobe to go to work in."

2. Labor market issues. The next most commonly cited category of barriers was labor market issues. Participants most often commented on the low wages and limited benefits of the jobs that were available to them. As one participant put it: "There are jobs, but they don't pay enough." Another argued that "I can't support three sons on minimum wage." A third participant related her struggles with low-wage employment: "I've been on and off [welfare]. . . . I've worked the majority of my life, but being a single mother . . . there's just not enough money."

Another barrier commonly cited by participants was their own lack of education and skills: "You gotta be experienced" and "you gotta have a lot of training." One participant said that her major barrier to employment was that "I can't read."

While participants mainly cited the above issues, a few questioned whether jobs were even available. One participant, who said she was actively looking for work, described her experience: "We're not taking applications, not hiring. That's all I get." Some complained about the difficulty of finding lasting employment. As one participant recounted: "Every time it would seem like I would get a good job, I'd work for a while and then . . . something would happen, the economy would go down, I'd get laid off. So I was just like on and off, on and off, on and off."

3. Family or personal problems. Finally, family concerns were cited by participants in all three states as barriers to employment. These included health problems, housing crises, children in trouble with the law, and a combination of factors. Some participants seemed overwhelmed by such issues. One focus group member summed up her situation: "We have a lot of life issues going on right now: [my daughter's] father committing suicide, my mother's been in the hospital off and on — she's been sick since August. There's just so many things going on, and we're planning to move because the relationship I have is not working out. So I've got my hands full." A participant who was working part time, trying to find day care, and dealing with a medical problem suggested how hard it would be for her to get completely off welfare and added: "It's very frustrating because . . . I could only go so far in so many ways. I'm trying my best."

Several participants cited medical problems as barriers to work. One participant said: "There's days when I'm ill, I can't get out of bed, but yet they want me to go out and get a job." Another explained: "I can't work because of [an] accident. I went to welfare when I had nothing else."

Finally, a few participants described serious problems regarding their children, which for them took precedence over working. The following are two examples:

> I'm having a problem right now with my son. He got arrested . . . and I can't get him out. . . . I need to be there with my other boys. They're in and out of juvenile, too."
>
> My son gives me a lot of problems in school. I mean, I want a job . . . but I'd like to be home right now cause like I said, I'm having a lot of problems with my son.

II. The Time Limit

The subject of time limits was not mentioned in any of the focus groups or telephone interviews until it was introduced by the facilitator or interviewer. This suggests that the upcoming time limit on their benefits was not at the forefront of participants' minds, though there may be other reasons why participants did not raise the issue on their own. More important, when the subject was introduced, participants said that the time limits were not a primary factor influencing what they were currently doing. Instead, they were likely to be either continuing a path off welfare that they had initiated without regard to the time limit or focusing on dealing with other life issues that overshadowed the time limit in the short term. Only a few participants suggested that the time limit had pushed them to go to school or finish school or to get a job more quickly than they otherwise would have.

Most participants also believed that time limits were a generally fair policy, though they thought there should be some flexibility in imposing the time limit to account for individual situations. Some participants, however, were angry about the policy, believing that it would hurt those who most needed assistance.

A. Understanding the Time Limit

The great majority of participants were aware of the time limits, though misinformation and confusion were common. Most did not know exactly when their own time limit would be reached, gave dates that could not have been correct, or incorrectly identified the consequences of reaching the time limit. While some participants thought that they understood the policy, most admitted to being confused. Some had never paid attention to the details of the policy. Others remembered being told about the policy but had forgotten the specifics. Still others said that they received conflicting information from welfare staff, neighbors, and other sources. One participant complained that "I keep hearing different stories."

In all three states, the majority of participants incorrectly believed that the time limit meant an end to all assistance — including cash aid, food stamps, and Medicaid. Typical responses to the question of what would happen at the time limit included the following:

> Food stamps, Medicaid, your AFDC grant, all that stuff — it'll be over at the end of your time.
>
> [They will] just cut me off. No cash assistance or food stamps.
>
> That's what I was told. Everything gonna be cut off.
>
> You're on your own.

Emphasizing the seriousness of the time-limit policy, a Fond du Lac participant said that "this is not a game." A Florida participant described the time limit as "do or die."

A few participants were not aware of a time limit on their benefits, though there may be a variety of reasons for this. One or two participants, who had severe medical problems, may have been exempt from the time limit. Some Vermont participants who were combining work and welfare may have already been working enough hours in an unsubsidized job to satisfy that state's post-time-limit work requirement. Some may already have been in the process of leaving welfare when they became subject to the time limit. In other cases, however, participants may have faced an upcoming time limit without being aware of its existence.

A few participants seemed to have a clear understanding of the new policies. For example, one participant who attended a focus group in Vermont explained that state's time-limit policy well: "My understanding is that if a person doesn't get a job, that they then would have to get some sort of public sector job or whatever, they would be assigned that and probably still get some benefits." The participant added, however: "I don't really know."

B. Attitudes Toward the Time Limit

Participants were asked whether they felt that a time-limit policy was fair. An overwhelming majority in all three states said that it was, but most also believed that it should be flexible to accommodate individual situations. Participants suggested that time limits could provide a push to those who were not taking steps to get off welfare and a check on those who abused the system. There was a strong feeling, however, that individuals who try to help themselves and who are in genuine need of assistance should not be denied aid.

Echoing a common theme in public attitudes toward welfare, many participants felt that welfare should be only a temporary source of assistance and that a time limit was needed to keep people from abusing the system. As these participants commented:

> You shouldn't be on welfare forever. There should be a time limit. People should figure out their goals for themselves and for their children.

People need a time limit, because without one, teenagers are just going to sit there and have babies and not better themselves and just wait for the mailman.

Some people just sit around and don't care, and they should have a time limit.

You have to have some deadline. It is a push to move on.

Others felt that a time limit was fair because the welfare system also provided services to help people get on their feet. One participant explained it this way: "They give everyone a chance to get what they need — either an education or a job — and they get them going on their own." A participant who had completed a training program said that at first she "thought it was unfair, but after I went through training, I thought it was fair so I could help myself."

Although they generally believed that a time limit on benefits was fair, most participants felt that the time limit should be longer, not apply to everyone, or be flexible. Most participants' attitudes can be summed up by this comment from a Florida participant, who said that a time limit "is both fair and unfair, because some people really need it [welfare], and then some people don't really need it, and it will make them get up and find a job." Another typical comment was this one: "There should be time limits for people milking the system, not for people trying."

Participants also suggested that a "one-size-fits-all" strategy was not appropriate for a diverse population. They tended to agree with the Vermonter who said time that limits were "a little too cut and dry. There are a lot of people on the system and they are not all the same. The rules are as if everyone has that same situation." Another participant argued that "they [the welfare system] don't know what you've been through. They don't know your individual circumstances. They don't know what's happened and why you're there."

Balancing out their concerns about abuse of the system, many participants were worried about those who played by the rules but either could not work or could not find a job. As one participant argued: "Why should they be penalized if they're really, really trying? I don't think that's fair." Another participant suggested that "people who are trying should be given extended time." Participants suggested the following specific exemptions from a time limit: People with medical problems or disabilities that prevented them from working, parents with small children, people who were low-skilled or had little education, and people who lived in areas where few jobs were available. (In fact, all three states have some opportunities for exceptions or extensions to the time limit for certain groups of recipients.) Several participants also expressed a general sense that the system was unfair, and would end up penalizing those who tried to help themselves, without stopping those who abused welfare. As one participant explained: "Those who want something for nothing, they'll find a way around the system. They'll still get their benefits . . . the honest group, they'll be left out."

A few argued that the time limit should be longer. As one participant explained: "I see their intent to try and get people off and move them forward. But in the long run, I don't think they're giving people enough time." Another participant, who no longer received welfare, said that the "time limits aren't long enough, because it took me four years to get off." A participant

who was working but still receiving welfare argued that "I need extra time so I can get completely off the system. I took the job I have, but it doesn't pay enough." Hardly any participants, however, expressed concern about recidivism — i.e., returning to welfare. One of the few such comments came from a Vermont participant, who asked: "People can get a job, but what happens if they are laid off?" Although many participants described a history of cycling between welfare and employment, they overwhelmingly thought about time limits in terms of what it would take to get off welfare — not about whether they might need to return in the future.

There were also a few participants who felt strongly that time limits were not fair. For example, one participant saw time limits as "just another way for them to be able to control you . . . hassle you and put you down and make you feel worse than you already do." Another participant said that time limits were unfair "because they won't help me get off, they won't help me get my child support." Another participant argued that time limits without employment opportunities were not fair. She asked: "If we don't have the businesses here, where the hell are all these women going to work?" A few participants resented the implication that they needed to be forced to work. One welfare recipient said: "I've never been on it [welfare] before. I worked all my life. This is just something that happened to me. Something I couldn't help at the time. So I do resent them telling me it's time to get off."

Finally, a few participants were angry about the consequences they foresaw of a time-limit policy. One participant asked: "Are they just gonna let people in this country, the richest country in the world, starve to death? Are they gonna have soup lines? What are these people gonna do that really need it?"

C. Concern About the Time Limit

All participants in both the focus groups and the telephone surveys were asked to rate how much they thought about the time limit, on a scale of zero to 10 or zero to 100, with zero meaning that they never thought about it and 10 or 100 meaning that they always thought about it. Their responses tended to be near the extremes. A majority were confident that they would be self-sufficient before they reached the time limit, but a substantial minority were extremely anxious about what would happen to them.

Many participants were not concerned about the time limit, believing that they would be self-sufficient by the time they reached it. This was especially true of many of those who had already left welfare. As two participants from Vermont explained: "I knew I could go out and get a job" and "I was already employed when I heard about that. . . . I was receiving it [welfare] because I was only working part time, but I wasn't worried because I knew I could find employment." A participant from Fond du Lac, who is now working and off welfare, said that she was not concerned when she learned about the time limit because she had almost completed a degree program: "They were just starting to talk about it [the time limit] when I was finishing up school," she said, "I was glad I had gone to school."

Others were similarly unconcerned, but for less clear reasons. Some seemed to live one day at a time, without planning for the future. For example, one participant said: "I didn't think

about it until you started talking about it . . . in the back of my mind I knew it was coming — my deadline is coming." Another said: "I really don't think about it until I get a letter in the mail." Others seemed passive, like the participant who said: "I don't worry about it. . . . I would pray if they cut it off tomorrow. I feel the good Lord would provide for me."

Only a few participants did not believe that the time-limit policy was real. This was mostly apparent in one Florida focus group, where participants believed the time limit would not be implemented. One participant in that group suggested that "there's no way that they can deny that to an American citizen; they can't do it." Another said that "somehow, some way, they'll come up with another program to supplement those who are off."

As the discussions progressed, anxiety about time limits increased, and by late in the focus groups, a substantial proportion of participants rated their anxiety level as extremely high. The following responses came from all three states and from participants who were both on and off welfare:

I'm scared to death right now and I don't know what to do.

[I'm] worried that I won't be able to find a job soon enough.

I'm worried if there's going to be a job available if I lose mine.

I just worry about my kids. . . . What if I don't have a job? What do I do?

My security is gonna be gone. I hope I can hold it together.

I get headaches, my stomach will hurt. Oh, God, what am I gonna do?

How am I going to be able to take care of my son?

Some of those who were combining work and welfare were especially anxious about the time limits because they recognized the difficulty of being fully self-sufficient. One participant who was already working part time said: "I'll be worried if I don't find a second job." Another wondered how she could support her family since "I work part time, barely making minimum wage, no child support." A third, who was self-employed and receiving a partial welfare grant, said that she was "scared. . . . I still have to make this business work by . . . next year and be making enough money [to be self-supporting]."

D. Responses to the Time Limit

Most participants said that the time limits did not affect their behavior or their plans for self-sufficiency. Many maintained that, when they first heard about the time limit, they were already in the process of going to school, looking for work, or working at least part time toward the goal of getting off assistance. Participants generally felt that they did not need additional motivation to want to get off welfare. As one welfare recipient explained: "I didn't really want to be on it from the beginning, but I had to, and I feel it's time for me to get off without them telling me I've got a time limit." This was an especially common response from those who had left welfare, as the following comments illustrate:

I never planned to stay on welfare.

I had already gone back to work part time when it came into effect for me.

I was off welfare before it came into effect.

I really wanted a job, and they did not have to push me that much.

A few participants, however, said that the time limit motivated them and pushed them to get off welfare or to get off more quickly than they otherwise would have. As one individual explained: "It makes me work harder for myself. . . . I guess I'm not gonna sit here for years, and makes me say, well, I gotta do something."

Most commonly, those who said that they were influenced by the time limit were either inspired to go to school (most often at the post-secondary level), or were already attending school and rethought their education plans in the context of a time limit. Two participants who were enrolled in school explained how the time limit affected them:

> That's why I planned to do the education in a certain amount of time. I liked the limits and the framework so I knew how much time I had to move ahead and get the education. . . . It was a motivator.
>
> When I was told that I would only have a few years more, I felt like OK, I have to go to college now. It really got a lot of things going.

Finally, two participants told more dramatic stories of how they had changed their behavior in response to the time limit. The first, a Florida participant who had left welfare, said: "I knew my time was going to be up, so I went ahead and took a job, and am going to school part time, and moved in with my fiancé so things were not so hard." The second was a participant from Fond du Lac who had been going to school full time and working part time, while receiving a partial welfare grant. She said that she quit school to go to work full time "because of this time limit; because I needed to provide for my family."

E. The Time-Limit Message

Participants in both the focus groups and the telephone interviews were asked what message they felt the welfare system was conveying to them by establishing a time limit on benefits. Most participants perceived the message as a fairly straightforward one: that you need to go to work and you can't be on welfare forever.[5]

> They're telling people that you're going to have to support yourself. We're not gonna do it for you forever."

---

[5]Technically, AFDC assistance has always been "time-limited" in the sense that adults cannot continue to receive a grant after their youngest child is too old to be considered a dependent.

> You need to take responsibility for yourselves because we aren't going to support you for the rest of your life.
>
> You've got to get a job. You can't expect the state to support you for the rest of your life.
>
> Welfare is not a way of life anymore.

Several participants described the message of time limits as spurring people to action. "They just don't want you sitting around all day on your bum," was the response of one participant. Another said that the message was "wake up and do something."

Some participants said that the message was one of a reciprocal commitment: We will provide you with the support and help you need to get off welfare. A participant from Vermont put it this way: "They want you to be self-supporting, but yet they're there for you, to get you back on your feet."

Others thought the message was as much about human capital development as quick employment:

> If you're working or maybe going to school or maybe in a training program . . . that's not a problem as long as you're doing something to help yourself.
>
> People should use their time wisely while they can and get training and education to get a good job.

Only a few participants described the time-limit message in very positive or very negative terms. Those who saw it as positive spoke of the message as conveying confidence in their ability to succeed. One participant described the message as saying: "You can get off welfare in a certain amount of time. . . . It sort of tells me that I'm capable of it, that it's not impossible." Another said: "They're trying to tell us that we know you can get off welfare."

Finally, a few described the message as a very negative one. The strongest comments came from two participants. One described the message of time limits as "Get a job, you scumbag." The other said "Blaming, judging . . . that people on welfare are bad and they're lazy." For some other participants, the message was somewhat less harsh but equally uncaring:

> Just get a job. Forget about security for the kids. Get off the system. Others are paying for you.
>
> Our state isn't going to help anybody with a need. Our state don't care. Our politicians don't care.

III. Policies That Accompanied the Time Limit

In all three of state programs, time limits were accompanied by a variety of other policies

and programs designed to move welfare recipients to work (see Table 1.2). In Florida and Wisconsin, welfare recipients were required to take part in employment and training activities and were eligible to receive support services, such as child care and transportation assistance. Similar activities and services were available in Vermont, but participation was voluntary. All three programs also had financial incentives, under which welfare recipients who went to work could keep more of their earnings while still receiving a partial welfare grant. These were most generous in Florida and least generous in Wisconsin.

A. Understanding the Policies

At best, participants in the focus groups and telephone interviews had an incomplete understanding of the policies. When welfare-to-work programs and services were discussed, some participants in each of the three states made comments like: "Nobody has even told me about any of these things"; "I have no idea what you guys are talking about" and "I didn't get anything that you're saying. This is just not true."

The majority of participants in Florida and Wisconsin, however, were aware of the mandatory employment and training activities, as well as the support services that were available to them. Some participants, in fact, equated the new welfare policies more with these services and requirements than with the time limit. Participants from those two states were less aware of the financial incentives available to welfare recipients who went to work. In discussing their states' policies, no participants mentioned the financial incentives.

Participants from Vermont less often knew about the existence of similar — though voluntary — employment and training activities and support services, though they were somewhat more aware of the financial incentives to help make work pay.

In addition, some participants who knew about the incentives and services expressed skepticism that they were real, as the following comments illustrate:

> I had a girlfriend that did go to work that was supposed to get all these benefits, and she actually had less to live on.
>
> When I first went in there to sign the paperwork to get on the program, they promised me to pay for my training. . . . I never seen that.

B. Views About Incentives and Services

Many of those who knew about and took advantage of available services said that they were helpful. In Vermont, participants who were combining work and welfare cited as major benefits the increased earnings disregards and the ability to own a more valuable car:

> I have a better car than the piece of garbage I was driving . . . and I have underwear that I didn't have before because I get to keep $150 a month.

> When I got laid off — I had bought a car while working. . . . They told me that I didn't have to sell my car, and I was relieved. . . . I would have had to sell my car under the old policy.
>
> The increased disregards gave me incentive to get a job. . . . [I'm] not totally losing everything.

One Vermont participant said that the pressure of a time limit motivated her to take advantage of available services. "I'm in a Reach Up program," she explained, referring to the state's welfare-to-work program, "because when I heard of this time limit thing I thought, well, I'm gonna start now. I'm not gonna wait till the last minute."

In Florida, participants talked about the help they received with education, training, transportation, child care, and clothing:

> They supplied gas money for me each week, to go to school and to work and to drop my daughter off at child care and pick her up.
>
> They tell you get some clothes to go to work with. Buy you new shoes, new socks, new underwear, and everything.
>
> They helped with transportation to work, gas money, gas vouchers to go to work. . . . They paid for my tuition . . . books . . . any lab supplies or anything like that I need.

Some Florida participants did not find the services especially helpful. For example, one participant complained that "when it came time for me to get some automobile repairs, I got lots and lots of hassles . . . so I don't consider that helpful because it took time for me to leave my job."

In the Fond du Lac focus groups, a few participants said that the training they had received was helpful. One participant, however, described a mandatory job search workshop as counterproductive: "You have to go to all these meetings and stuff like that when you could be out looking for a job."

C. Welfare "Diversion" Policies

In Fond du Lac, the welfare agency used a policy commonly called "diversion" to encourage individuals to explore other options as an alternative to receiving welfare. Staff asked applicants and recipients whether they could get a job or find alternate means of support. Applicants were told about the program's tough new work requirements to give them an idea of what welfare would entail. Staff also described the time limit policy, recommending that, to the extent possible, individuals "bank" their limited time on welfare for when they would need it most.

A focus group was held in Fond du Lac with women who had left welfare or failed to complete a welfare application at about the time they were first informed about Work Not

Welfare. Although none of these participants were receiving welfare, it is unclear to what extent the diversion policy was a factor. Even without it, some may never have completed their application or may have been ready to leave welfare anyway — in fact, some participants said that this was the case. More relevant to this report, the time limit seems not to have been a primary factor in whatever impact the policy may have had. Instead, participants were influenced by the new program requirements and by the way staff presented their options. The concept of "banking" time also did not seem to play a role in participants' decisions; nobody said that they were saving their time for when they might need it more.

Describing their experiences, two of the women reported as follows:

> I called them up and made the appointment as usual, and they told me it would be better off for me to get a job than to get welfare.
>
> My husband is working full time. . . . I go to school and work part time. And they said, "You have to go to full-time work."

A few participants said that they decided to turn away from welfare because of the hassle of the new requirements and the attitudes of staff. One suggested that "a lot of people are confused. That's why they just say the heck with it and get off it because they really don't understand the program." Another offered this explanation: "It's the way they make you feel. They make you feel like you have to be poor and living out on the streets before they can really help you out."

Chapter 3

Staff Perspectives

This chapter uses data from surveys and interviews to examine time-limited welfare from the perspectives of line staff in welfare agencies in Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin. The chapter addresses this topic in three ways. First, it discusses how time limits were affecting workers' day-to-day activities and attitudes during the period when the data were collected. Second, it examines how staff presented the time limits to recipients, and how workers believed recipients were responding. This topic was addressed from another perspective in Chapter 2, which described discussions with current and former welfare recipients. Finally, this chapter describes how staff perceived their state's time-limit policies overall.

I. The Data Used in This Chapter

During the study period, two main categories of line workers had extensive contact with welfare recipients in the Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin time-limit programs: eligibility workers and employment and training workers.[1] Traditionally, eligibility workers are the primary point of contact between recipients and the system; they are responsible for determining welfare eligibility and for calculating benefits. Employment and training workers — who typically work only with the subset of recipients who participate in employment-related activities — are responsible for working with recipients to develop and implement a plan for them to prepare for and find jobs.

In interpreting the information in this chapter, it is important to bear in mind that all three programs made some changes in the traditional staffing structure. The change has been most dramatic in Escambia County (Pensacola), Florida, where eligibility workers have been replaced with case managers; the latter have reduced caseloads and are expected to assume much broader responsibilities (though separate staff are still responsible for employment and training functions). When the data for this report were collected, Vermont and Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin, had taken less striking but nonetheless important steps to promote linkages between eligibility and employment and training staff, and to increase the extent to which eligibility workers focused on issues related to employment and self-sufficiency.

Despite the important differences across states, this chapter generally uses the generic terms "eligibility worker" and "employment and training worker" to refer to the two categories of staff. (Escambia County FTP case managers are considered to be eligibility workers.)

The information comes from two main sources: staff surveys and individual and group interviews, each of which is discussed below.

---

[1]Other categories of workers, such as child care and child support enforcement staff, also had extensive contact with subsets of recipients, but these staff are not discussed in this chapter.

A. Staff Surveys

In the spring and summer of 1996, MDRC administered written surveys to virtually all line workers in Escambia County, Florida, and in the six Vermont welfare districts that are participating in the state's welfare reform evaluation. In all, nearly 300 workers completed surveys. This report draws information from surveys of four groups of workers:[2]

- Eligibility workers in six welfare offices in Vermont. When the survey was administered, each of these workers was responsible for working with three groups of AFDC recipients: those subject to the time limit and enhanced financial work incentives; those with no time limit, who received the enhanced incentives; and those subject to traditional AFDC rules, which included neither a time limit nor enhanced incentives.[3] The survey asked staff a series of questions about how they worked with each of these groups of recipients.

- Workers in Vermont's Reach Up employment and training program. Like the eligibility workers, Reach Up staff worked with recipients in all three of the groups described above.[4]

- Family Transition Program case managers in Escambia County, Florida. As noted above, Family Transition Program case managers are eligibility workers whose roles have been expanded under Florida's time-limit program.

- Workers in Escambia County's Project Independence employment and training program. These staff were assigned to work exclusively with participants in the Family Transition Program.

The four surveys included many of the same questions, but were tailored to the particular state and type of worker. MDRC attempted to survey all workers in the appropriate category; survey response rates were high, exceeding 85 percent in all cases.[5]

Most of the questions in the staff surveys took the form of 7-point scales. Workers were asked to circle the number that best reflected their view. For example, one question was phrased as follows:

---

[2]Surveys were also administered to about 80 eligibility and employment and training staff who worked with recipients in a control group that was created for the Family Transition Program evaluation and, for that reason, remained subject to traditional AFDC rules in Escambia County, Florida. These responses are discussed only briefly in this report.

[3]Over time, MDRC will compare the outcomes for the three groups of recipients. Sixty percent of the caseload were assigned to the group with both a time limit and financial incentives; 20 percent were assigned to each of the other groups.

[4]This analysis combines the responses of several different categories of Reach Up workers.

[5]Surveys were completed by 82 Vermont eligibility workers, 72 Vermont Reach Up workers, 27 FTP case managers, and 20 FTP Project Independence workers.

How much is your job about helping people get off welfare?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						A great deal

In discussing these questions, this chapter generally refers to the percentage of respondents who placed themselves toward one side of the scale. For example, on the question above, 4 percent of Escambia County Family Transition Program case managers circled number 1, 2, or 3; these workers leaned toward believing that their job was not about helping people get off welfare. In contrast, 81 percent of respondents circled 5, 6, or 7, indicating that they believed their job was about helping people get off welfare. Fifteen percent of workers circled 4, indicating that they did not lean strongly in either direction. Except where otherwise noted, this chapter excludes people who chose 4, the neutral response.

B. Staff Interviews

MDRC staff conducted group and individual interviews with both eligibility and employment and training workers in Escambia County, Florida, several welfare offices in Vermont, and Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin. MDRC developed discussion guides for these interviews, but the interviews tended to become wide-ranging discussions focusing on issues of concern to staff.

More extensive information is available about the Florida and Vermont programs because formal staff surveys were administered there. The information about Wisconsin is based primarily on staff interviews.

II. How Time Limits Were Affecting Staff Attitudes and Activities

Welfare recipients are not the only people who are expected to be affected by the "sense of urgency" created by time limits. In all three states, policymakers and administrators see time limits not only as a vehicle for motivating recipients, but also as a strategy for reorienting the welfare system and its staff. As a Wisconsin administrator put it, "Time limits are the engine that keeps everyone moving, clients and staff. They provide a sense of urgency and purpose."

A. How Time Limits Are Expected to Affect Welfare Staff

The presence of a time limit is expected to motivate staff to focus more of their time and energy on helping recipients either to become employed or to leave welfare before the time limit expires. The time limit "clock" is also intended to function as an organizing tool that can help staff structure their jobs to achieve desirable outcomes within clear time frames. In this way, the time limit is seen as a way to transform the traditionally paper-process-oriented operation of the welfare system. As an administrator in Vermont commented, "Time limits are a wake-up call for

the welfare system. They force staff to think more clearly and singlemindedly about what their jobs are really supposed to be about."

Managers also emphasized the importance of the time-limit clock as a way to help their staff plan and to make them more accountable for their performance. Schedules and deadlines have always been an important part of the welfare system. But the presence of the time limit is designed to shift the focus of planning from meeting deadlines for discrete activities, such as completing redeterminations (a basic task for eligibility workers) or completing employability plans (a basic task for employment and training workers), to more goal-oriented planning to help recipients become employed or leave welfare. In the past, this kind of planning had been part of the responsibility of employment and training staff, but the time limit may make it more important by imposing a clear deadline with potentially serious consequences if recipients are not employed before the time limit is reached.

Finally, managers hope that the time limit will build more of a shared sense of purpose among different staff and strengthen team-building in their programs. As part of its welfare reform initiative, each state has pursued a variety of management strategies to try to build more of a team approach among eligibility, employment and training case management, child support enforcement, and other staff. The time limit is seen as reinforcing these efforts by providing a common goal, and a common time frame for accomplishing it, for different staff with different job missions and priorities. As one Vermont manager put it, "We are all working from the same script now."

B. How Staff Were Affected

Are the expectations of policymakers about the influence of time limits on staff attitudes and practices being realized? This question is difficult to answer because, in these three states, time limits have been implemented along with other reform policies that can produce similar results. For example, all three states have taken steps to more clearly emphasize the goal of getting recipients employed quickly. In the past, programs that emphasized quick employment (but did not include time limits) have sometimes succeeded in creating the sense of urgency that policymakers hope will result from time limits.[6] It is difficult to attempt to disentangle the effects on staff practices of different reform policies that interact in complex ways. In interviews and surveys, however, staff tried to isolate the difference time limits were making for them.

1. Eligibility workers. In interviews, eligibility workers in all three states said that time limits had helped to shift the main focus of their job away from long-term income maintenance and toward helping and encouraging recipients to move toward self-sufficiency. The extent of this shift seemed to vary from program to program, but it was evident everywhere and was borne out by staff survey data. For example, an identical question on the Florida and Vermont staff surveys directly asked staff, "Does the time limit change your job so that it is more about how the client can become self-sufficient?" As shown in Table 3.1, in Vermont, where only a portion of

[6]See, e.g., James Riccio, Daniel Friedlander, and Stephen Freedman, *GAIN: Benefits, Costs, and Three-Year Impacts of a Welfare-to-Work Program* (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1994).

Table 3.1

Responses to Selected Questions About How Florida and Vermont Eligibility Workers Were Affected by Time Limits

Question	Percentage of Workers Answering Strongly in the Affirmative	
	Florida	Vermont
Because of the time limit:		
Are you in a greater hurry for clients to start an activity that will lead to self-sufficiency?	93	57
Are you more likely to encourage clients to work as soon as possible?	85	70
Are you more likely to encourage clients to take a job that is poorly paid or has other unfavorable features?	19	13
Does the time limit change your job so that it is more about how the client can become self-sufficient?	89	59

Sources: Surveys of eligibility workers in six Vermont welfare offices and Family Transition Program case managers (eligibility workers) in Escambia County, Florida.

Note: The questions were structured in the form of 7-point scales. The low end of the scale (number 1) was labeled "no effect on me" and the high end (number 7) was labeled "large effect on me." The figures in this table represent the percentage of workers who circled 5, 6, or 7— in other words, those who leaned toward the high end of the scale.

each worker's caseload was subject to the time limit, nearly 60 percent of eligibility workers nonetheless said that the time limit had a large effect in this regard; the comparable figure was nearly 90 percent among Family Transition Program case managers in Florida.

In addition to the general perception of a new "mission," eligibility staff reported some concrete changes in their activities. Eligibility workers in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, reported that they had more frequent contact with recipients, spent more time discussing issues related to employment, and worked more closely with employment and training staff. Although it is not clear to what extent these changes were driven by the time limit per se (as opposed to the program's work requirements or other policy changes), workers reported that the time limit put pressure on them to ensure that recipients were moving forward at all times.

On the survey, eligibility staff in Vermont reported that they spent somewhat more time on "client assistance" work — defined as "giving help and advice to clients about how to make good decisions about education and other services, looking for and taking jobs, getting off welfare, and removing personal barriers to self-sufficiency" — when they were working with recipients in the group that is subject to the time limit.[7]

Eligibility staff in all three states also reported that the time limit helped to create a sense of urgency; this, in turn, led them to encourage recipients to move quickly into jobs or other activities to prepare for employment. As shown in Table 3.1, a majority of eligibility workers in Florida and Vermont said that, because of the time limit, they were "in a greater hurry" to move recipients into activities, and that they were more likely to urge recipients to work as soon as possible. (As expected, the percentages were somewhat lower in Vermont; as discussed below, when data for this report were collected, Vermont had made less dramatic changes in the role of eligibility workers, and these staff were not expected to play as broad a role as were their Escambia County, Florida, counterparts.) Interestingly, workers in both states said that the time limit did not push them to encourage clients to accept low-paying jobs. As discussed below, staff in both programs tended to encourage recipients to use the time available to them to upgrade their skills, as opposed to urging them to leave welfare as quickly as possible.

There seem to be two main reasons why the presence of a time limit on welfare receipt induced staff to focus more on employment or self-sufficiency. First, although eligibility staff frequently expressed frustration about their clients' behavior, most workers appeared to be sincerely concerned about the well-being of recipients and, especially, their children, and wanted them to become self-sufficient before reaching the "cliff." Thus, perhaps the most important motivator was simple compassion.

Second, to varying degrees, staff in all three programs felt responsible for ensuring that their recipients — at least those who made a sincere effort — did not reach the time limit without

[7]In Florida, there were very large differences between the responses of Family Transition Program case managers and traditional welfare eligibility workers regarding the distribution of time between client assistance work and financial work. However, it is not possible to attribute this difference to the time limit; the case managers had much smaller caseloads than the traditional eligibility workers, and thus more time to spend with each recipient.

a job. This perception was probably stronger among employment and training workers, but it affected eligibility staff as well. Although there is no evidence that staff evaluation criteria actually measured this outcome, in all three programs there was a strong "message" that program success was defined in part by minimizing the number of people who reached the limit without jobs. In Vermont and Florida, this objective may have been closely related to a desire to limit the number of people for whom post-time-limit public jobs might be needed.

Although these changes were important, some qualifications are necessary. Changes in the role of eligibility workers were most dramatic in Florida and Wisconsin, both of which implemented their initial time-limit programs as small, generously funded pilot projects, and combined the time limit with a range of new services and requirements for recipients. The changes were less striking in Vermont, where the time-limit program has operated statewide from its inception, and where there are few work-related mandates in the pre-time-limit period. For example, most Vermont eligibility workers were not engaging in extensive social service work: Nearly two-thirds of the workers said that they were *not* discussing clients' personal or family problems more than they did before the Welfare Restructuring Project was implemented. In response to another question, most workers said that when they had a conversation with a client between scheduled redetermination interviews, it was usually because the client had contacted them, rather than vice versa.[5]

It is also clear that the changes generated specifically by the time limit were generally not very large: About two-thirds of the Vermont eligibility workers said that they were no more likely to discuss a series of specific work-related issues with clients who were subject to the time limit than with those who were not. This may have been true in Florida and Wisconsin as well, but it is more difficult to tell because the policy changes implemented along with the time limit were more dramatic, making it especially hard to isolate changes attributable to the time limit per se.

2. Employment and training workers. Employment and training workers have always had a "mission" of helping recipients move to self-sufficiency, but the time limit appears to have affected the strategies they use to achieve this goal. In addition, as with eligibility workers, the time limit has increased the speed and intensity of their efforts.

Changes in employment and training were particularly dramatic in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. These changes were driven partly by the time limit and partly by the program's work mandates, which required many recipients to participate in employment-related activities nearly full time (the specific number of hours depended on the size of their grant). Education and training activities — previously a key focus of the JOBS program — were usually restricted to the first 12 months of a participant's "clock" under Work Not Welfare. Staff said that the time limit put added pressure on them to design a sequence of activities that would lead quickly to employment without wasting valuable time on the "clock." There was heavier use of unpaid work experience, short-term training (see below), and job search/job placement activities. Employment and

[5]Changes in workers' roles may be more dramatic in Vermont and Wisconsin today because the states have begun to implement new hybrid staff positions that combine eligibility and employment and training functions.

training workers also reported that the time limit pushed them to work more closely with eligibility staff to ensure that they were conveying the same message and that no one fell through the cracks.

The time limit also helped to change the day-to-day lives of employment and training workers in Florida. On the survey, large majorities of Escambia County employment and training staff said that the time limit pushed them to act quickly, to keep closer track of participants, and to favor shorter activities. In interviews, several workers said that the time limit made their jobs more stressful because they felt they were responsible for ensuring that participants would find jobs by the time they reached the limit — even if the participant was facing serious barriers to employment. As one worker put it, "We have 24 months to fix problems that took 40 years to create." As with eligibility workers, relatively few employment and training workers said that the time limit made them more likely to encourage clients to take low-paying jobs; as discussed below, workers were likely to encourage FTP participants to use their available time to upgrade their skills.

Vermont's Reach Up Program was intended to operate in essentially the same way for participants in all three research groups during the pre-time-limit period.[9] Nevertheless, on the survey, nearly all Reach Up staff said that it was very important for them to know whether a new participant was in the group that is subject to the time limit, suggesting that staff activities may have differed for these participants. Reach Up staff reported that they frequently discussed the time limit with participants, and more than half of these workers said that they were more concerned that a participant's Reach Up activities would lead quickly to work if the participant was subject to a time limit.

In addition, as shown in Figure 3.1, staff in Vermont said that they sent a somewhat different message to participants in the group with a time limit. For example, staff said that they were somewhat more likely to encourage clients with a time limit to choose a job over a training program. On the other hand, it is important to note that these differences were fairly modest, and that the Reach Up Program overall was still heavily focused on education activities. Moreover, 68 percent of workers said that they did not encourage participants in the time-limit group to enter shorter education and training activities. As noted earlier, however, staff attitudes and the message staff sent to recipients may be different as more people approach — and reach — the time limit.

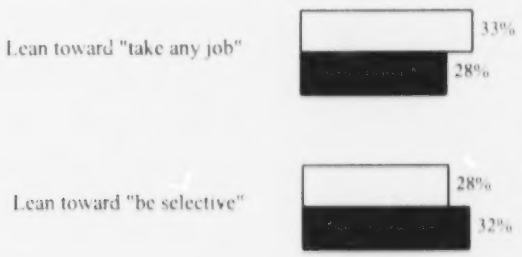
3. Increased pressure. Staff reported that time limits put more pressure on them. One cause of the pressure was that, particularly in Florida and Wisconsin, where intensive participation requirements accompanied the time limits, the programs had been forced to deal with participants facing serious barriers to employment: those with very young children, extremely low levels of skills, emotional problems, or histories of substance abuse, and people facing a range of

[9]Two months prior to reaching their time limit, single-parent recipients in the group subject to the time limit are required to participate in job search activities. No such families had reached that point when data for this report were collected.

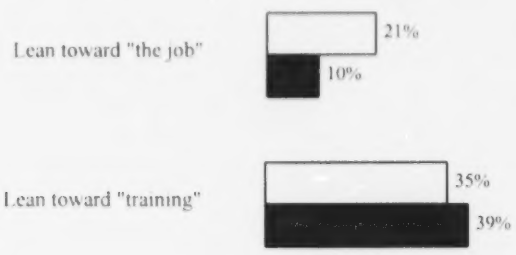
Figure 3.1

Employment and Training Strategies:
Views of Employment and Training Workers in Vermont

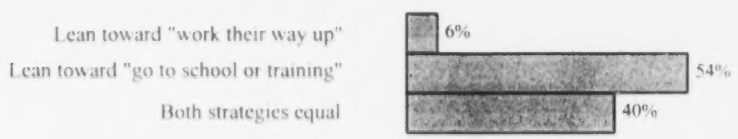
What message do you communicate to participants: To take any job they can get or to be selective about the jobs they take?



Suppose one of your participants is trying to decide between a job that would not get her off welfare and a vocational training class at a community college. Which would you recommend more strongly?



In your opinion, which is best for most welfare recipients: getting jobs as quickly as possible and working their way up from a low-paying job or going to school or training in order to get a better job in the future?



For recipients with a time limit For recipients without a time limit For all recipients

Source: Survey of Reach Up case managers (employment and training workers) in six welfare districts in Vermont.

Notes: The questions were structured in the form of 7-point scales. The scale for the first question ranged from "always say take any job" (1) to "always say be selective" (7). Respondents are described as leaning toward "take any job" if they circled 1, 2, or 3, and are described as leaning toward "be selective" if they circled 5, 6, or 7. The second question used a similar scale. The scale for the third question ranged from "working their way up" (1) to "both strategies equal" (4) to "going to school or training" (7).

personal and family crises.[10] In the past, many of these recipients would have been excused from work-related mandates, but both the Family Transition Program and Work Not Welfare narrowed the exemption rules to target a broader share of the caseload. The presence of the time limit put added pressure on managers and staff to develop strategies for working with these harder-to-serve participants.

This problem was particularly acute in Fond du Lac County, where the total welfare caseload dropped dramatically — from about 600, when Work Not Welfare began operating in January 1995, to fewer than 350 in the spring of 1996. It is hard to know how much to attribute the caseload decline to the time limit, other reform policies, or an improving labor market. Whatever the causes, staff perceived the families remaining on AFDC as being even more difficult to work with.[11] The tougher caseload meant more recipients who were not cooperating with program requirements and who faced more barriers to employment. As a result, staff reported that their jobs became progressively more demanding. As one eligibility worker put it, "It is becoming clear that there is a lot more to it than making people work."

The Florida and Wisconsin programs responded to hard-to-serve recipients in various ways. The most direct strategy was to hire more staff to lower the individual caseloads and to permit more intensive contact between workers and participants. In addition, the Escambia County Family Transition Program contracted with a local mental health facility to obtain "psycho-social" assessments for participants with serious problems, and stationed a full-time mental health counselor in the program office. The Work Not Welfare Program employed a designated social worker.

A second factor that may have increased the pressure on workers was their role in determining whether families' benefits would be terminated at the time limit. When data for this report were collected, this issue had emerged most clearly in Escambia County, where a number of FTP participants had reached the time limit. The program developed an elaborate, multistep process to review cases approaching the time limit in order to determine whether they would be eligible for extensions or post-time-limit public work opportunities. In both cases, the determination depended in large part on whether the participant was considered to have complied with program requirements. Although many cases are clearly compliant or noncompliant, others fall into a gray area and require difficult judgments (the program does not have a specific definition of compliance). Ultimately, the views of line workers and their supervisors play the largest role in determining how a participant will be treated upon reaching the time limit.

Although line workers have always exercised some discretion in determining whether welfare applicants or recipients will be able to receive benefits, the stakes are much higher in an environment of time limits.

---

[10]This may likely become an issue in Vermont as more recipients reach the time limit and become subject to work requirements.

[11]In fact, nearly half the cases remaining in the spring of 1996 were exempt from Work Not Welfare. If nonexempt cases leave assistance in large numbers, the percentage of exempt cases is likely to increase because these recipients tend to stay.

Finally, staff in all three programs felt increased pressure to move recipients from welfare to work. For example, more than half of Escambia County employment and training workers said on the staff survey that they would be held responsible if one of their clients reached the time limit without finding a job. Some felt that this was unfair because some participants faced extraordinary obstacles to employment.

In both Escambia County and Fond du Lac County, staff frequently mentioned the negative consequences of staff departures. It is not clear whether the turnover rate was higher than normal in these programs, but the consequences may have been greater in the context of a time limit, when there is little room for disruptions or gaps in work preparation activities. Some staff in Florida believed that turnover in their program was attributable in part to much higher levels of stress generated by the time limit and the fact that the Family Transition Program has been constantly scrutinized by the media, state legislators, the Review Panel, and others.

III. How Staff Presented the Time Limit to Recipients

In presenting the time limit to recipients, staff typically tried to instill a sense of urgency while simultaneously maintaining a positive, upbeat message. Thus, in group and individual program orientations, workers often combined a discussion of the time limit with a description of the services and incentives that were intended to help recipients prepare for and find jobs. [12]

The message of urgency can be seen in the way staff presented the time-limit policy to recipients. During the study period, all three states' policies included at least some exceptions that allowed people to continue receiving benefits after the time limit (or, in Vermont, to be exempted from the work requirement) under certain circumstances. However, especially in Florida and Wisconsin, workers tended to avoid discussing the possibility of exceptions to the time limit when they met with new participants. In interviews, staff in both programs said that they did not want to create the perception that there were loopholes in the policy out of concern that this might reduce the time limit's ability to motivate recipients. As shown in Figure 3.2, most eligibility and employment and training workers in Escambia County said in the staff survey that they rarely told new participants about extensions of the time limit. Similarly, most workers said that they rarely told new clients that if they cooperated with the Family Transition Program, the state would ensure that they got a job by the time they reached the time limit (although this was the official program policy).

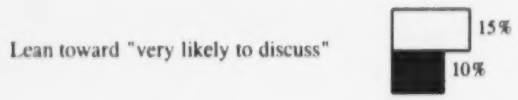
In contrast, as shown in Figure 3.3, workers in Vermont were quite likely to tell recipients about the community service jobs that would be provided to people who reached the time limit without jobs. This difference reflects the fact that Vermont's time-limit model is a work requirement rather than a benefit cut-off, and the provision of community service jobs is a major part of that model. (Despite this effort by staff, many of the recipients interviewed — see Chap-

[12] In addition to the message presented by staff, the states also used written materials to tell recipients about — and later remind them of — the time limits.

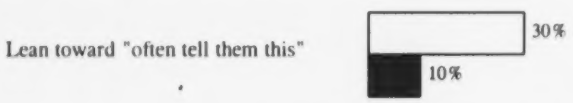
Figure 3.2

How Staff Have Discussed the Time Limit with Clients in Florida's Family Transition Program

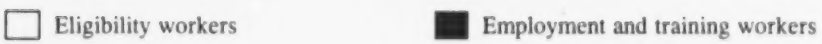
When discussing FTP with new clients, how likely are you to tell them about extensions of the time limit?



Do you tell clients that if they cooperate with FTP, the program will ensure that they get a job by the time they reach the time limit?



Do you ever advise clients to go off welfare so that they can save the months that are allowed under the time limit for when they need them most?



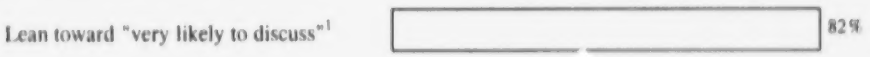
Sources: Surveys of Family Transition Program case managers (eligibility workers) and Family Transition Program/Project Independence career advisors (employment and training workers) in Escambia County, Florida.

Notes: The questions were structured in the form of 7-point scales. The figures represent the percentages of workers who "leaned toward" the labeled response. For example, the scale for the first question in the figure ranged from "very unlikely to discuss" (1) to "very likely to discuss" (7). The figure shows the percentage of respondents who circled 5, 6, or 7.

Figure 3.3

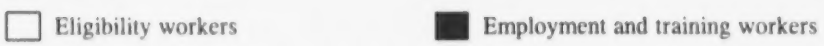
How Staff Have Discussed the Time Limit with Clients in Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project

When you are discussing the WRP time limit with new clients, do you tell them about community service jobs?



Do you tell clients that it is not likely or very likely that they will get a community service job if they reach the time limit without finding a job?

Do you ever advise participants to avoid reaching the time limit (e.g., by taking a job they might not otherwise take)?



Sources: Surveys of welfare eligibility workers and Reach Up case managers (employment and training workers) in six welfare districts in Vermont.

Notes: The questions were structured in the form of 7-point scales. The figures represent the percentages of workers who "leaned toward" the labeled response. For example, the scale for the first question in the figure ranged from "very unlikely to discuss" (1) to "very likely to discuss" (7). The figure shows the percentage of respondents who circled 5, 6, or 7.

[1]This question was not asked of employment and training workers.

ter 2 — did not understand that jobs would be provided after the time limit if they were unable to find one on their own.)

The "opportunity" side of the time-limit message is more complicated. Because the time limit at first probably seems far away to most recipients, it is important for staff to provide advice about the most appropriate immediate next steps. One possible message is to urge clients to use the time available to them to obtain education or training to prepare for a job that would pay relatively well. Another approach is to urge clients to find a job and leave welfare as quickly as possible in order to "bank" months of eligibility in case they are needed later. Both strategies have advantages and potential downsides: Under the former approach, recipients may use up all of their allotted months and still obtain a job only marginally better than the one they might have found sooner; they would then be left without a welfare safety net. Under the latter strategy, the recipient may continually cycle back and forth between welfare and low-wage jobs, steadily accumulating time against the clock without becoming more employable.

The Fond du Lac program clearly leaned toward the latter approach. Although some participants entered education or training activities — including several innovative short-term training programs designed to fit the time-limit environment[13] — the focus was clearly on stopping the clock as quickly as possible. Some workers described the months of available assistance as a set of coupons or a bank account that should be drawn down only if absolutely necessary. This message meshed well with other policy changes. For example, workers might tell recipients who had other income sources (such as a part-time job or child support payments) that it was not worthwhile for them to use up valuable months, especially since they would be required to work or participate in activities in exchange for their welfare checks.[14]

Vermont's message — at least during the pre-time-limit period — has more closely resembled the former model. Participation in Vermont's JOBS program, Reach Up, is voluntary until just before the time limit, and the program itself has placed a heavy emphasis on post-secondary education and training. As shown in the two top sections of Figure 3.1, most Reach Up employment and training staff believed that education and training were generally more effective than quick employment. They leaned somewhat more toward an employment-focused

---

[13] In Fond du Lac County, Work Not Welfare staff worked with local employers and the school district to establish short-term training programs in areas such as the hospitality industry, offset printing, welding, and nursing assistantships (leading to a Certified Nurse Assistant credential). Often taught by high school vocational education instructors, the programs offered hands-on instruction using curricula designed in cooperation with employers. Classes were small, and the courses usually lasted fewer than 12 weeks. Most included tours of workplaces in the specific field. Staff in Fond du Lac reported that the programs were very popular among recipients and that the vast majority of those who started the programs completed them and found jobs, although not necessarily in their field of training.

[14] To bolster this message, Work Not Welfare gave participants child support payments that had been collected on their behalf, and counted these payments as income (after a $50 disregard) in calculating the participant's grant. Under traditional AFDC rules, child support payments were retained by the state, with the recipient's receiving only a "pass through" of up to $50 per month. Wisconsin's policy did not change the total amount of money a participant received from child support payments and welfare, but did make clearer for participants how much of that income was from child support payments.

approach for participants with a time limit than for those who did not have a time limit, but the differences were not dramatic.

Florida's program was in the middle. Early on, its message was strongly focused on education and training, but managers later moved toward a quick-employment focus. Staff still showed some ambivalence: As shown in Figure 3.4, 70 percent of the employment and training workers said on the survey that their agency's main goal was to help Family Transition Program clients get jobs quickly, whereas 30 percent thought that the main goal was both to get jobs quickly and to raise skill levels; no one thought the primary goal was raising skill levels alone. When asked, however, whether it was better for a welfare recipient facing a time limit to get a job quickly or go to school or training so as to potentially get a better job, 65 percent of these workers said that they viewed the two strategies as being equally appropriate, or leaned toward education and training. Although workers appeared to believe that the presence of a time limit reduced the appropriateness of education and training somewhat, they still believed that skill-building activities were important in many cases.

At the same time, about half of Escambia County eligibility and employment and training workers said that they often advised clients to leave welfare quickly in order to save up months for when they would be needed most. This message was probably complicated by the Family Transition Program's generous earned income disregard. Under this rule, the first $200 plus half of any remaining earnings are disregarded in calculating participants' monthly welfare grants. Because of the disregard, many working recipients remain eligible for a partial AFDC check in months when their earnings would otherwise have made them ineligible. In other words, participants who find jobs are likely to stay on welfare longer. Some workers reported in interviews that they sometimes advised clients who were working and receiving small AFDC checks that they might want to "opt out" of AFDC in order to avoid using up months toward the time limit.

IV. How Staff Thought Recipients Were Responding

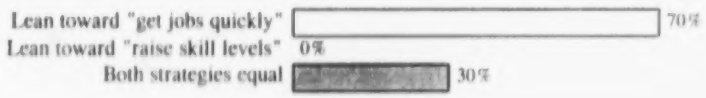
In interviews, staff generally reported that they believed that most recipients understood the time-limit policies and were aware of where they stood relative to the "clock." On the staff survey, two-thirds of Florida eligibility workers and more than 70 percent of Vermont eligibility workers reported that the typical client who had used up 18 months of welfare would have been very aware of how much time she had left.

Many staff doubted whether the time limit was an effective motivator for clients. As shown in Figure 3.5, fewer than half of Florida eligibility and employment and training workers reported that reminding a client about the time limit was an effective way to increase her motivation. The responses of Vermont workers, shown in Figure 3.6, were quite similar. Also, 46 percent of Vermont eligibility workers and 44 percent of Florida eligibility workers felt that the average client who had been subject to the time limit for 18 months was "very worried" about it. Vermont Reach Up workers believed that a higher percentage of clients were worried about the time limit. This may be because they worked only with the subset of people who volunteered for that program. Florida employment and training workers believed that few clients were worried

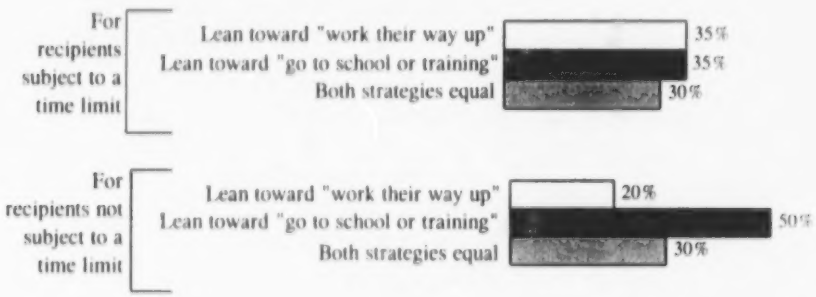
Figure 3.4

Employment and Training Strategies:
Views of Employment and Training Workers in Escambia County, Florida

Which do you think is FTP's main goal for participants: helping them get jobs as quickly as possible or raising their education and skill levels?



In your opinion, which is best for most welfare recipients: getting jobs as quickly as possible and working their way up from a low-paying job or going to school or training in order to get a better job in the future?



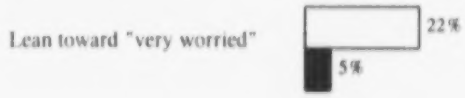
Sources: Surveys of Family Transition Program/Project Independence career advisors (employment and training workers) in Escambia County, Florida.

Notes: The questions were structured in the form of 7-point scales. The scale for the first question ranged from "getting jobs quickly" (1) to "both strategies equal" (4) to "raising skill levels" (7). Respondents are described as leaning toward "get jobs quickly" if they circled 1, 2, or 3, and are described as leaning toward "raise skill levels" if they circled 5, 6, or 7. The lower panel shows the responses to two questions with identical scales ranging from "working their way up" (1) to "both strategies equal" (4) to "going to school or training" (7). Respondents were first asked this question with reference to clients with a time limit, and then with reference to clients without a time limit.

Figure 3.5

Staff Perceptions About Clients' Responses to the Time Limit in Florida's Family Transition Program

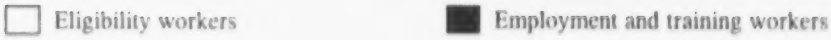
Is the average client who has just recently been assigned to FTP not worried or very worried about the time limit?



Is the average client who was assigned to FTP 18 months ago and is still on welfare not worried or very worried about the time limit?

Suppose an FTP client seems uninterested in becoming more self-sufficient. Is reminding the client about the time limit an ineffective or an effective way to increase her motivation?

Do clients believe that if they reach the time limit, they will have their entire AFDC grant canceled?



Sources: Surveys of Family Transition Program case managers (eligibility workers) and Family Transition Program/Project Independence career advisors (employment and training workers) in Escambia County, Florida.

Notes: The questions were structured in the form of 7-point scales. The figures represent the percentages of respondents who "leaned toward" the labeled response. For example, the scale for the first question ranged from "not worried" (1) to "very worried" (7). The figure shows the percentage of respondents who circled 5, 6, or 7.

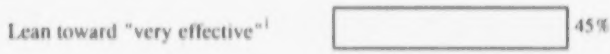
Figure 3.6

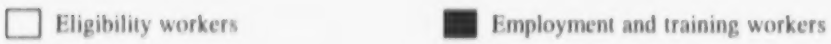
Staff Perceptions About Clients' Responses to the Time Limit in Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project

Is the average client who has just been assigned to the time limit not worried or very worried about the time limit?

Is the average client who has been assigned to the time limit for 18 months and is still on welfare not worried or very worried about the time limit?

Suppose a client seems uninterested in becoming more self-sufficient. Is reminding the client about the time limit an ineffective or an effective way to increase motification?





Sources: Surveys of welfare eligibility workers and Reach Up case managers (employment and training workers) in six welfare districts in Vermont.

Notes: The questions were structured in the form of 7-point scales. The figures represent the percentages of workers who "leaned toward" the labeled response. For example, the scale for the first question ranged from "not worried" (1) to "very worried" (7). The figure shows the percentage of respondents who circled 5, 6, or 7.

[1]This question was not asked of employment and training workers.

about the limit. Finally, nearly 40 percent of Vermont workers felt that many clients may have adopted the time limit as their personal time frame for leaving welfare, rather than trying to exit sooner. In Wisconsin, one worker suggested that the time limit motivated workers more than recipients.

In interviews, staff suggested a number of reasons why they thought recipients might not have been more strongly motivated by the time limit. First, staff said that many recipients did not believe their benefits would be terminated at the limit. This view seemed nearly universal among Family Transition Program case managers in the program's early days, before anyone had reached the time limit. Even in August 1996, several months after the first recipients had reached the time limit and had had their benefits canceled, nearly 60 percent of eligibility staff and 75 percent of employment and training workers said on the staff survey that "few" clients believed that their entire grant would be canceled at the time limit. (In the focus groups and interviews with recipients, however — see Chapter 2 — few said they did not believe the time limits were real.)

Second, some staff believed that recipients tended to be poor planners or felt that the time limit was too distant to cause concern. Third, staff believed that some recipients had other, unreported sources of income and were not deeply concerned about losing their benefits.

V. How Staff Viewed Their States' Time-Limit Policies

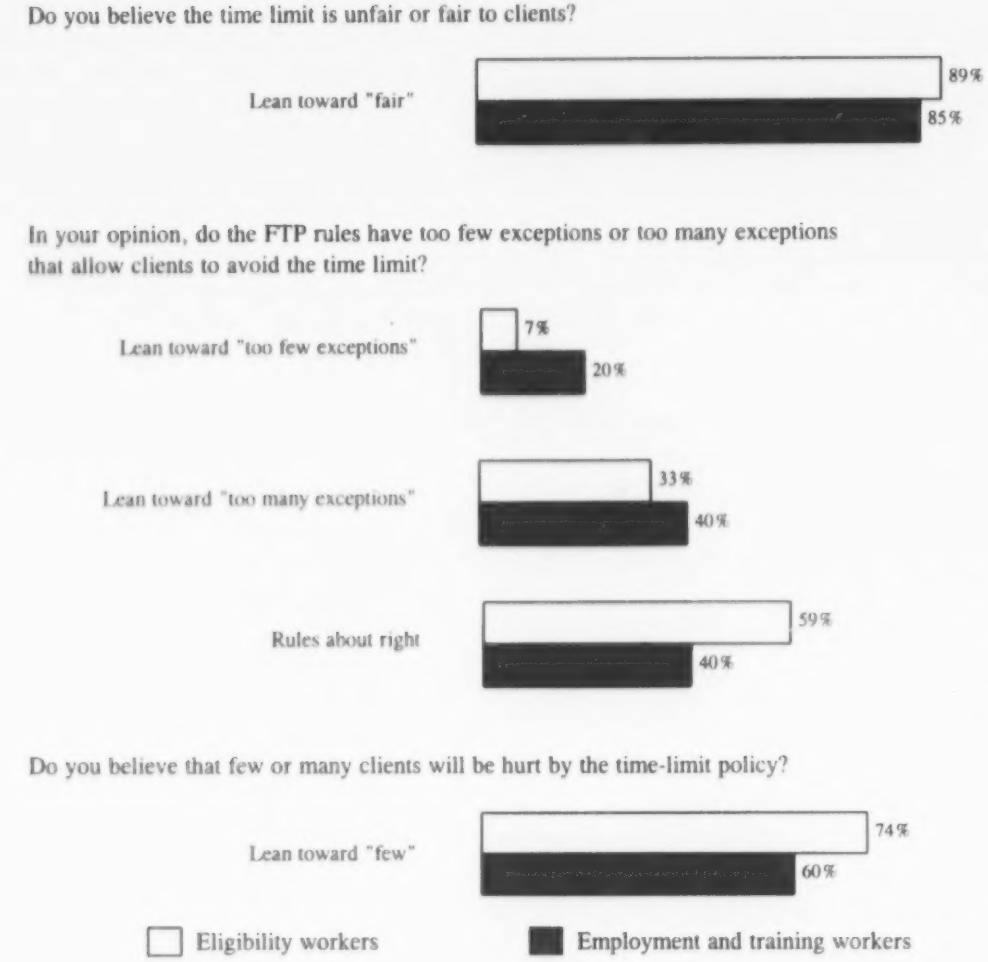
In interviews, staff in all three states expressed support for the general goals and design of their states' time-limit programs. The vast majority of the staff who were interviewed believed that the concept of a time limit, as defined in their state, was both appropriate and reasonable. The staff surveys supported this perception. For example, as shown in Figures 3.7 and 3.8, when asked whether the time limit was fair or unfair to clients, at least 80 percent of the staff who worked in the time-limit programs in Florida and Vermont leaned toward "fair"; most workers leaned strongly in that direction.

At the same time, in interviews, many workers expressed reservations about particular aspects of the policies. Figure 3.8 shows that, in Vermont, roughly half of eligibility and employment and training workers reported that the time frame for their program's work requirement and the rules for exceptions were "about right." [15] More than 40 percent of eligibility workers, however, thought that the program's policies should be tougher in these areas. Conversely, one-fourth of employment and training workers felt that clients were required to go to work too quickly.

[15]Under Vermont's rules, certain categories of recipients are exempt from the time limit (e.g., those who are age 60 or over, disabled or incapacitated, or caring for a disabled relative). In addition, the work requirement may be temporarily postponed to allow for completion of certain education programs, and required work hours may be reduced for recipients making satisfactory process in an education program.

Figure 3.7

Staff Perceptions of the Time-Limit Policy in Florida's Family Transition Program


Do you believe the time limit is unfair or fair to clients?
Lean toward "fair"
89%
85%
In your opinion, do the FTP rules have too few exceptions or too many exceptions that allow clients to avoid the time limit?
Lean toward "too few exceptions"
7%
20%
Lean toward "too many exceptions"
33%
40%
Rules about right
59%
40%
Do you believe that few or many clients will be hurt by the time-limit policy?
Lean toward "few"
74%
60%
Eligibility workers
Employment and training workers

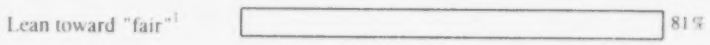
Sources: Surveys of Family Transition Program case managers (eligibility workers) and Family Transition Program/Project Independence career advisors (employment and training workers) in Escambia County, Florida.

Notes: The questions were structured in the form of 7-point scales. The scale for the first question ranged from "unfair" (1) to "fair" (7), and the figure shows the percentage of respondents who circled 5, 6, or 7. Similarly, the scale for the third question ranged from "few" (1) to "many" (7), and the figure shows the percentage of respondents who circled 1, 2, or 3. The scale for the second question ranged from "too few exceptions" (1) to "rules about right" (4) to "too many exceptions" (7). Respondents who circled 1, 2, or 3 are shown as "leaning toward" the low end of the scale, those who circled 5, 6, ot 7 are described as "leaning toward" the high end, and those who circled 4 are described as saying the rules are about right.

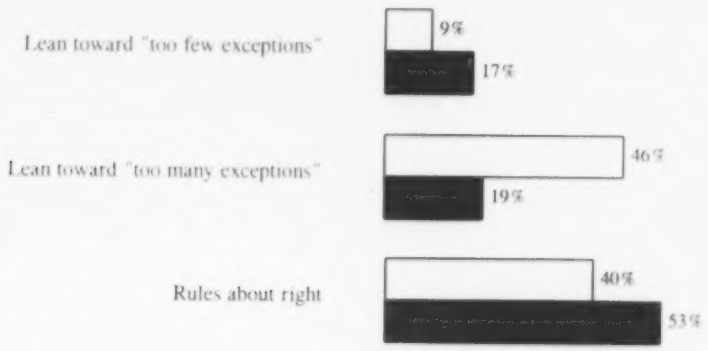
Figure 3.8

Staff Perceptions of the Time-Limit Policy in Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project

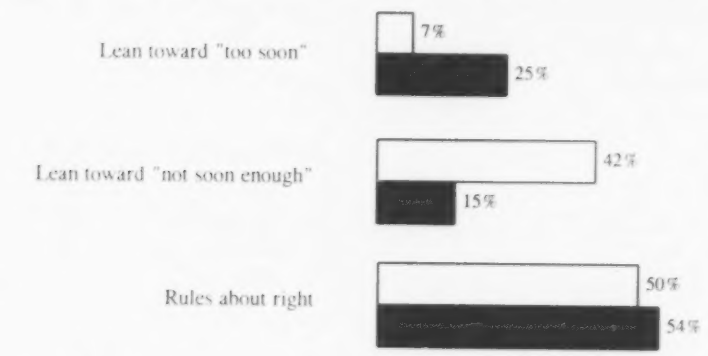
Do you believe the time limit is unfair or fair to clients?

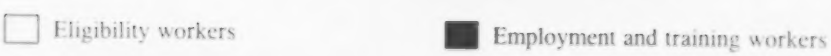


Do the WRP rules have too few exceptions or too many exceptions that allow clients to avoid the mandatory work requirement?



Do the WRP rules require clients to go to work too soon or not soon enough?





Sources: Surveys of welfare eligibility workers and Reach Up case managers (employment and training workers) in six welfare districts in Vermont.

Notes: The questions were structured in the form of 7-point scales. The scale for the first question in the figure ranged from "unfair" (1) to "fair" (7), and the figure shows the percentage of respondents who circled 5, 6, or 7. The scale for the second question ranged from "too few exceptions" (1) to "rules about right" (4) to "too many exceptions" (7). Respondents who circled 1, 2, or 3 are described as "leaning toward" the low end of the scale, those who circled 4, 5, or 6 are described as "leaning toward" the high end, and those who circled 4 are described as saying the rules are about right. The third question used a similar format.

[1]This question was not asked of employment and training workers.

In both Florida and Wisconsin, where families' grants were likely to be canceled at the time limit, workers voiced concern about whether the policies were flexible enough to protect some recipients who were incapable of working steadily. For example, in Escambia County, Florida, workers noted that the rules for granting exemptions that stopped the time-limit clock for recipients with emotional or physical problems were quite restrictive: In general, there had to be a physician's statement certifying that the client was unable to work. However, staff described particular recipients who appeared to fit into a "gray area": They had emotional problems that made it difficult for them to work steadily but could not obtain a physician's statement declaring them unable to work.

On the staff survey, Family Transition Program case managers were asked to estimate what percentage of their clients had "such significant barriers that they are incapable of becoming self-sufficient before they reach their time limit." Estimates varied widely; on average, however, workers thought that the figure was about 20 percent for clients with a 24-month time limit and 24 percent for those with a 36-month limit.[16] A subsequent question asked how many of the clients who were incapable of becoming self-sufficient would qualify for an exemption under current rules: More than 80 percent of respondents leaned toward "very few."

But the story is not so simple. As shown in Figure 3.7, when Escambia County staff were asked whether the Family Transition Program rules allowed "too few exceptions or too many exceptions that allow clients to avoid the time limit," only 7 percent of eligibility workers and 20 percent of employment and training workers said that the rules allowed too few exceptions. When asked whether the time limit was likely to hurt few or many clients, a large majority of workers leaned toward "few" (a word that is obviously subject to varying interpretations).

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions from this combination of questions, but it may be that workers felt that most people whose grants would be terminated, despite their being incapable of self-sufficiency, would receive enough help from food stamps, Medicaid, community social services, and family members to avoid serious harm. In Fond du Lac, where some staff raised similar concerns, a program manager predicted that "no child will be allowed to starve in this county." This manager believed that it would be possible to draw distinctions among parents, and that the community would support families after the time limit if the parents were doing their best. On the other hand, if the parent was not making a sufficient effort to support her family, the administrator felt that the child welfare agency would need to consider removing the children from the parent's custody.

[16]As noted in Chapter 1, the standard time limit is 24 months within a 60-month period. However, certain groups of particularly disadvantaged recipients — accounting for about 35 to 40 percent of the caseload — are limited to 36 months in any 72-month period.

Appendix

The Focus Groups and Telephone Interviews: Background, Methodology, and Characteristics of Participants

Of the 99 individuals who participated in the focus groups and telephone interviews, 55 were receiving welfare benefits at the time, 38 had left the welfare rolls, and 6 others were "diverted" from welfare – that is, they had chosen not to receive welfare benefits.[1] The breakdown of individuals in the three states is as follows:

- In Florida, 11 individuals on welfare in Pensacola attended focus groups. An additional 15 on welfare as well as 14 off welfare were interviewed by telephone.

- In Vermont, 11 individuals on welfare and 9 individuals off welfare attended focus groups in Barre and St. Albans. Another 9 on welfare and 10 off welfare from those two districts were interviewed by telephone.

- In Wisconsin, 9 individuals on welfare attended a focus group in Fond du Lac, as did 5 individuals off welfare and 6 who were diverted from receiving welfare. No telephone interviews were conducted in Wisconsin.

I. How Participants Were Selected

In Florida and Vermont, where MDRC is conducting random assignment evaluations of the states' time-limited welfare programs, individuals were selected based on information obtained during the random assignment process (i.e., the point at which each person was randomly assigned to a group that would be subject to the program or to a control group that would not be subject to it). In Vermont, individuals were targeted who were randomly assigned to the group subject to a time limit in August or September 1994. In Florida, individuals were targeted who were randomly assigned in June or July 1994. Those periods were chosen so that participants could have been relatively far along toward their time limit and therefore could have had time to respond to it — for example, by looking for work. The researchers also expected that the time limit might be more "real" to those individuals because they could have been closer to reaching it and presumably would have been reminded of that fact in their meetings with welfare department staff.[2] In addition, the sample was limited to individuals who, at the time of random assignment,

---

[1]All six were from Wisconsin, where new welfare applicants as well as welfare recipients (at the time of their eligibility redetermination interview) were encouraged to use means of support other than welfare.

[2]At the time the interviews took place, individuals in Florida would have used up 20 or 21 of their 24 or 36 months of welfare receipt if they had received welfare continuously from the date their time-limit clock began. Individuals in Vermont would have used up 17 or 18 of their 30 months. Those in Wisconsin would have used up 12 to 14 of their 24 months.

were single parents who were already receiving welfare (i.e., not new applicants) because they would have had experience with the welfare system prior to the implementation of time limits.

Invitations to take part in a focus group were mailed to all individuals randomly assigned during those periods in Pensacola, Florida, and in two Vermont districts, Barre and St. Albans. Follow-up phone calls were made to those who did not respond to the letter. Those who did not attend a focus group were later called again and invited to participate in a telephone interview. Repeated attempts were made to reach individuals for participation in telephone interviews until the total of 99 participants – in both the focus groups and telephone interviews – was achieved.

In Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin, where MDRC is not conducting a separate random assignment study, the researchers relied on program staff to identify those individuals who enrolled in the county's Work Not Welfare Program – either as new applicants or during the process of redetermining their continued eligibility for benefits – between January and March 1995. Invitations to attend the focus groups were then sent to all those still on welfare, as well as to most of those off welfare and a group who had chosen not to receive welfare in the first quarter of 1996. Because confidentiality issues made it impossible to obtain telephone numbers for individuals who did not attend focus groups, no telephone interviews were completed in Wisconsin (in the other states, MDRC had access to telephone numbers from baseline forms completed by participants at the time of random assignment).

II. Structure of the Focus Groups and Telephone Interviews

All the focus groups were held in a central, neutral location (such as a church or community center) in the targeted districts. The focus groups for individuals on welfare were held during the day, and those for individuals off welfare were held in the evening. Child care was provided at each focus group. The focus groups generally lasted about two hours, and the telephone interviews took about 20 minutes to complete. Participants in both the focus groups and telephone interviews in all three states received either a small cash payment or an equivalent gift certificate as an expression of appreciation for their having taken the time to participate.

The focus groups had four main components:

- **Priorities.** In this introductory exercise, participants were asked to draw a circle on a piece of paper and to place an "X" in the center of the circle, representing themselves and their children. Participants were then asked to place the following elements in the circle, with those closest to the center representing those most important to them: home (being at home with their children), school (getting education or training), job (working or looking for work), and life (dealing with personal or medical problems). Participants were then asked to explain to the group why they had placed those elements as they had. This exercise was designed to get participants thinking about their

situation and priorities, and to provide some background information on participants' lives.

- **Welfare and work.** Participants were asked to complete the following sentences: "For me and my family, being on welfare means. . . ." and "For me and my family, working means. . . ." This exercise was designed to get at participants' attitudes toward welfare and work. In addition, those off welfare were asked to discuss why they had left when they did. Those on welfare were asked to describe the factors that held them back from immediately getting a job that would take them off welfare.

- **Time limit.** A number of exercises were conducted to learn about participants' attitudes toward and reactions to the time limit-policies. Participants were asked to write down the first thing that came into their minds when they thought about a time limit on welfare benefits. Then they were asked to talk in depth about their reactions to the time limit. A "thermometer" exercise was used to gauge how concerned participants were about the oncoming time limit, on a scale of zero to 100. Participants were also asked to reflect on how the time limit had influenced their activities, what message they felt the welfare agency was giving with the time-limit policy, and whether or not they felt time limits were fair.

- **Other policies and services.** Participants were asked about their understanding of other policies (such as earnings disregards) and services (such as job search workshops, access to education and training, and child care and transportation assistance) that accompanied the time limit in their state. They were also asked whether they had used any of those services and whether the services were helpful. Those who were actively discouraged from being on welfare were asked about that experience.

The telephone interviews were designed to get at similar information, but were necessarily shorter and more structured than the focus groups. Respondents were asked directly about their activities and their sources of income. In an exercise similar to the one that involved drawing a circle, respondents were asked to prioritize the following activities: staying at home with their children, getting further education or training, working or looking for a job, and dealing with personal or family problems. Telephone interview respondents who were on welfare were also asked what issues prevented them from getting a job that would get them off welfare. Those off welfare were asked why they had decided to leave and whether their life was better or worse now than when they had been on welfare.

Telephone interview respondents were then asked about their top-of-the-head thoughts regarding a time limit on welfare benefits, and to explain their answers. They were also asked if they expected to use up their time limit and how concerned they were about what would happen thereafter. In an exercise similar to the focus group "thermometer," respondents were asked to

rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how concerned they were about the time limit. Finally, respondents were asked what message they thought the time limit on benefits was intended to communicate, and whether they thought the time-limit policy was fair.

III. Characteristics of Participants

To get some background information on participants and to see whether they resembled the larger welfare caseload, the researchers looked at data obtained as part of MDRC's evaluation of Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project.[3] Demographic data (collected on Baseline Information Forms as people entered the study) were available for 37 of the 39 people who either attended a focus group or were interviewed by telephone. The demographic characteristics were analyzed to see how those who were interviewed or attended groups compare with a broader group of people who were randomly assigned as recipients in Barre and St. Albans.

As shown in Table A.1, the basic demographic characteristics of attendees and interviewees resemble those of other recipients who did not attend. However, those who attended groups or were interviewed are somewhat more advantaged than those who did not in terms of their education and employment histories. Furthermore, attendees were more likely to report that they were working or participating in education or skills training at the time of the baseline survey. In addition, it is important to note that while the baseline demographics of the two groups were generally similar, there may be unmeasured differences between those who responded to the invitation to participate and those who did not.

Other aspects of participants' lives emerged in the course of the focus groups and telephone interviews. These tallies, though based on very small samples and information supplied solely by participants, can help shed some light on the lives of both welfare recipients and those no longer on welfare, and on the inadequacies of some common stereotypes of welfare recipients.

- **A substantial number of those on welfare reported that they were working, and a similar proportion of those no longer on welfare were not working.**

Approximately one-third of those on welfare reported that they were working either full time or part time, or had been hired for a job with a scheduled start date.[4] At the same time, only approximately two-thirds of those not on welfare met the same definition of employment. The others were receiving income from child support, disability, or a spouse's earnings, or had no clear means of support. Work emerged in the discussions as a central theme in participants' lives, regardless of whether or not they were working.

---

[3]Vermont was chosen as the test because those data were most readily available.

[4]Increased earnings disregards in all three states made it more likely that participants could be combining work and welfare by raising the point at which individuals became ineligible for welfare because of their earnings.

Table A.1

Selected Characteristics of Vermont Sample Members Who Participated in Focus Groups or Telephone Interviews and All Single-Parent Recipients
(St. Albans and Barre only)

Characteristic	Participated in Focus Group/ Interview	All Single-Parent Recipients[1]
Demographic characteristics		
Geographic area (%)		
St. Albans	48.7	47.6
Barre	51.4	52.4
Gender/sex (%)		
Female	94.6	94.8
Male	5.4	5.2
Age (%)		
Under 20	0.0	3.7
20-24	10.8	18.8
25-34	43.2	45.6
35-44	43.2	26.4
45 and over	2.7	5.6
Average age (years)	33.86	30.65
Family status		
Marital status (%)		
Never married	21.6	41.9
Married, living with spouse	0.0	0.6
Married, living apart	2.7	7.4
Separated	5.4	5.5
Divorced	70.3	43.5
Widowed	0.0	1.2
Age of youngest child (%)		
2 and under	27.0	29.4
3-5	24.3	24.9
6-12	37.8	33.3
13-18	10.8	12.4
Labor force status		
Worked full-time for 6 months or more for one employer (%)	70.3	60.1

(continued)

Table A.1 (continued)

Characteristic	Participated in Focus Group/ Interview	All Single-Parent Recipients[1]
Approximate earnings in the past 12 months		
None	64.9	71.1
$1-999	18.9	15.3
$1,000-4,999	16.2	10.5
$5,000-9,999	0.0	2.5
$10,000 or more	0.0	0.6
Currently employed (%)	32.4	18.1
Never worked (%)	0.0	10.1
Education status		
Highest credential earned (%)		
GED[2]	27.0	20.5
High school diploma	40.5	42.2
Technical/2-year college degree	10.8	7.8
4-year college degree or higher	10.8	3.2
None of the above	10.8	26.2
Highest grade completed in school (average)	12.16	11.38
Prior welfare receipt		
Resided as a child in a household receiving AFDC (%)		
Yes	16.2	26.0
No	81.1	66.2
Don't know	2.7	7.7
Aid Status (%)		
Applicant	0.0	0.0
Recipient	100.0	100.0
Housing status		
Number of moves in the past year (%)		
None	62.2	56.3
1 or 2	32.4	36.3
3 or more	5.4	4.4
Current and recent education and training activities		
Currently enrolled in education or training[3] (%)		
Any type	46.0	35.5
Adult education/High school/GED preparation	0.0	9.6
Vocational education/skills training	10.8	4.9
Post-secondary education	32.4	16.5
Job search/job club	10.8	7.0
Work experience	2.7	3.0

(continued)

Table A.1 (continued)

Characteristic	Participated in Focus Group/ Interview	All Single-Parent Recipients[1]
Enrolled in education or training during the previous 12 months[3] (%)		
Any type	56.8	41.1
Adult education/High school/GED preparation	2.7	12.5
Vocational education/skills training	16.2	7.2
Post-secondary education	40.5	15.9
Job search/job club	8.1	7.8
Work experience	2.7	5.2
Sample size	37	845

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Background Information Forms (BIFs). The two cases that were missing BIFs are not included in the calculations.

NOTES: Focus groups and telephone interview sample members were selected from among single-parent recipients randomly assigned in August and September 1994.

Distributions may not total to 100.0 due to rounding.

[1]Sample consists of all single-parent recipients randomly assigned from July 1994 to April 1995 in St. Albans and Barre.

[2]The General Educational Development (GED) certificate is given to those who pass the GED test and is intended to signify knowledge of basic high school subjects.

[3]Because some recipients may be in more than one category, totals may not equal all categories summed.

- **Those on welfare were much more likely to be participating in education than those no longer on welfare.**

One striking difference between the on and off welfare groups was the extent of reported participation in education. More than one-third of those on welfare said that they were either attending or registered to begin some sort of education (most commonly two-year colleges). In contrast, only a few of those off welfare were in school. Many of those who were on welfare and in school felt very strongly about the importance of education as a route to a good job – one that would both satisfy their career interests and pay well enough to support their families. Participants who were off welfare cited three reasons for their lack of involvement in education. First, many were not interested in going to school. Second, some had already completed an education program prior to getting a job and leaving welfare. Finally, some expressed an interest in attending school but – unlike those who chose to stay on welfare while they completed their education – opted to work full time.

- **Roughly the same percentage of those on and off welfare reported that they or their child had serious medical problems.**

Medical problems were noted by roughly a fifth of those both on and off welfare. The problems cited included: severe asthma, hepatitis, diabetes, neck and back problems, and mental health issues requiring medication. Those on welfare who had health problems commonly cited those problems as barriers to employment. In addition, one or two participants may have been exempt from time limits and/or work requirements owing to their medical condition. Some of those off welfare were working despite these reported medical problems. For others, however, disability benefits provided alternative family income.

- **Almost half of those off welfare reported having income from either child support or an employed husband or boyfriend. None of those on welfare reported similar sources of income.**

Nearly half of those off welfare said that they either received child support or had a husband or boyfriend who worked. For some, the amount was sufficient to be their sole source of income. Others used that income to supplement income from their own employment, so that the combined amount took them off welfare. In contrast, none of those on welfare reported having similar sources of income. Furthermore, inadequacy of child support collection was cited as a problem by several of those on welfare.

Selected Publications on MDRC Projects

Reforming Welfare

Books and Monographs

Reforming Welfare with Work (Ford Foundation). Monograph. 1987. Judith M. Gueron. A review of welfare-to-work initiatives in five states.

From Welfare to Work (Russell Sage Foundation). Book. 1991. Judith M. Gueron, Edward Pauly. A synthesis of research findings on the effectiveness of welfare-to-work programs. Chapter 1, which is the summary of the book, is also published separately by MDRC.

Five Years After: The Long-Term Effects of Welfare-to-Work Programs (Russell Sage Foundation). Book. 1995. Daniel Friedlander, Gary Burtless. An analysis of five-year follow-up data on four welfare-to-work programs.

After AFDC: Welfare-to-Work Choices and Challenges for States. Book. 1997. Dan Bloom. A summary and synthesis of lessons derived from studies of welfare reform programs.

ReWORKing Welfare: Technical Assistance for States and Localities

After AFDC: Welfare-to-Work Choices and Challenges for States. See under Books and Monographs.

Changing to a Work First Strategy: Lessons from Los Angeles County's GAIN Program for Welfare Recipients. 1997. Evan Weissman.

Work First: How to Implement an Employment-Focused Approach to Welfare Reform. 1997. Amy Brown.

Connections to Work Project

Alternative approaches to help welfare recipients and other low-income populations access and secure jobs.

Tulsa's IndEx Program: A Business-Led Initiative for Welfare Reform and Economic Development. 1997. Maria Buck.

Working Papers

Working Papers related to a specific project are listed under that project.

Learning from the Voices of Mothers: Single Mothers' Perceptions of the Trade-offs Between Welfare and Work. 1993. LaDonna Pavetti.

Unpaid Work Experience for Welfare Recipients: Findings and Lessons from MDRC Research. 1993. Thomas Brock, David Butler, David Long.

From Welfare to Work Among Lone Parents in Britain: Lessons for America. 1996. James Riccio.

Papers for Practitioners

Assessing JOBS Participants: Issues and Trade-offs. 1992. Patricia Auspos, Kay Sherwood.

Linking Welfare and Education: A Study of New Programs in Five States. 1992. Edward Pauly, David Long, Karin Martinson.

Improving the Productivity of JOBS Programs. 1993. Eugene Bardach.

Reports and Other Publications

Time-Limited Welfare

Florida's Family Transition Program

A study of Florida's initial time-limited welfare program.

The Family Transition Program: An Early Implementation Report on Florida's Time-Limited Welfare Initiative. 1995. Dan Bloom.

The Family Transition Program: Implementation and Early Impacts of Florida's Initial Time-Limited Welfare Program. 1997. Dan Bloom, James Kemple, Robin Rogers-Dillon.

Note: For works not published by MDRC, the publisher's name is shown in parentheses.

The Cross-State Study of Time-Limited Welfare

An examination of the implementation of some of the first state-initiated time-limited welfare programs.

Implementing Time-Limited Welfare: Early Experiences in Three States. 1995. Dan Bloom, David Butler.
The View from the Field: As Time Limits Approach, Welfare Recipients and Staff Talk About Their Attitudes and Expectations. 1997. Amy Brown, Dan Bloom, David Butler.

Making Work Pay

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP)

An evaluation of Minnesota's welfare reform initiative.

MFIP: An Early Report on Minnesota's Approach to Welfare Reform. 1995. Virginia Knox, Amy Brown, Winston Lin.
Making Welfare Work and Work Pay: Implementation and 18-Month Impacts of the Minnesota Family Investment Program. 1997. Cynthia Miller, Virginia Knox, Patricia Auspos, Jo Anna Hunter-Manns, Alan Orenstein.

The New Hope Project

A test of a neighborhood-based antipoverty program and welfare alternative operating in Milwaukee.

The New Hope Offer: Participants in the New Hope Demonstration Discuss Work, Family, and Self-Sufficiency. Working Paper. 1996. Dudley Benoit.
Who Got New Hope? Working Paper. 1997. Michael Wiseman.
Creating New Hope: Implementation of a Program to Reduce Poverty and Reform Welfare. 1997. Thomas Brock, Fred Doolittle, Veronica Fellerath, Michael Wiseman.

Canada's Self-Sufficiency Project (SSP)

A test of the effectiveness of a temporary earnings supplement on the employment and welfare receipt of public assistance recipients. Reports on the Self-Sufficiency Project are available from: Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), 275 Slater St., Suite 900, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5H9, Canada. Tel.: 613-237-4311; Fax: 613-237-5045. In the United States, the reports are also available from MDRC.

When Work Pays Better Than Welfare: A Summary of the Self-Sufficiency Project's Implementation, Focus Group, and Initial 18-Month Impact Reports. 1996. Social Research and Demonstration Corporation.
How Important Are "Entry Effects" in Financial Incentive Programs for Welfare Recipients? Experimental Evidence from the Self-Sufficiency Project (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation). Working Paper. 1997. David Card, Philip Robins, Winston Lin.

JOBS Programs

National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies

An evaluation of welfare-to-work programs launched under the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) provisions of the Family Support Act of 1988.

From Welfare to Work (Russell Sage Foundation). See under Books and Monographs.
The Saturation Work Initiative Model in San Diego: A Five-Year Follow-up Study. 1993. Daniel Friedlander, Gayle Hamilton.
Early Lessons from Seven Sites (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS]). 1994. Gayle Hamilton, Thomas Brock.
Five Years After: The Long-Term Effects of Welfare-to-Work Programs. See under Books and Monographs.
Adult Education for People on AFDC: A Synthesis of Research (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation [HHS, ASPE]). 1995. Edward Pauly.
Early Findings on Program Impacts in Three Sites (HHS, ASPE). 1995. Stephen Freedman, Daniel Friedlander.
How Well Are They Faring? AFDC Families with Preschool-Aged Children in Atlanta at the Outset of the JOBS Evaluation (HHS, ASPE). 1995. Child Trends, Inc.: Kristin Moore, Martha Zaslow, Mary Jo Coiro, Suzanne Miller, Ellen Magenheim.
Monthly Participation Rates in Three Sites and Factors Affecting Participation Levels in Welfare-to-Work Programs (HHS, ASPE). 1995. Gayle Hamilton.
Changing to a Work First Strategy: Lessons from Los Angeles County's GAIN Program for Welfare Recipients. 1997. Evan Weissman.
Work First: How to Implement an Employment-Focused Approach to Welfare Reform. 1997. Amy Brown.

Evaluating Two Welfare-to-Work Program Approaches: Two-Year Findings on the Labor Force Attachment and Human Capital Development Programs in Three Sites (HHS, Administration for Children and Families and ASPE). 1997. Gayle Hamilton, Thomas Brock, Mary Farrell, Daniel Friedlander, Kristen Harknett.

The GAIN Evaluation

An evaluation of California's Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) Program, the state's JOBS program.

GAIN: Child Care in a Welfare Employment Initiative. 1989. Karin Martinson, James Riccio.
GAIN: Early Implementation Experiences and Lessons. 1989. James Riccio, Barbara Goldman, Gayle Hamilton, Karin Martinson, Alan Orenstein.
GAIN: Basic Education in a Welfare-to-Work Program. 1994. Karin Martinson, Daniel Friedlander.
GAIN: Benefits, Costs, and Three-Year Impacts of a Welfare-to-Work Program. 1994. James Riccio, Daniel Friedlander, Stephen Freedman.

Related Studies:
The Impacts of California's GAIN Program on Different Ethnic Groups: Two-Year Findings on Earnings and AFDC Payments. Working Paper. 1994. Daniel Friedlander.
Can They All Work? A Study of the Employment Potential of Welfare Recipients in a Welfare-to-Work Program. Working Paper. 1995. James Riccio, Stephen Freedman.
Changing to a Work First Strategy: Lessons from Los Angeles County's GAIN Program for Welfare Recipients. 1997. Evan Weissman.

The Evaluation of Florida's Project Independence

An evaluation of Florida's JOBS program.

Florida's Project Independence: Benefits, Costs, and Two-Year Impacts of Florida's JOBS Program. 1995. James Kemple, Daniel Friedlander, Veronica Fellerath.

Other Welfare Studies

The Saturation Work Initiative Model (SWIM)

A test of the feasibility and effectiveness of an ongoing participation requirement in a welfare-to-work program.

Interim Report on the Saturation Work Initiative Model in San Diego. 1988. Gayle Hamilton.
Final Report on the Saturation Work Initiative Model in San Diego. 1989. Gayle Hamilton, Daniel Friedlander.
The Saturation Work Initiative Model in San Diego: A Five-Year Follow-up Study. 1993. Daniel Friedlander, Gayle Hamilton.

The Demonstration of State Work/Welfare Initiatives

A test of the feasibility and effectiveness of various state employment initiatives for welfare recipients.

Arizona: *Preliminary Management Lessons from the WIN Demonstration Program.* 1984. Kay Sherwood.
Arkansas: *Final Report on the WORK Program in Two Counties.* 1985. Daniel Friedlander, Gregory Hoerz, Janet Quint, James Riccio.
California: *Final Report on the San Diego Job Search and Work Experience Demonstration.* 1986. Barbara Goldman, Daniel Friedlander, David Long.
Illinois: *Final Report on Job Search and Work Experience in Cook County.* 1987. Daniel Friedlander, Stephen Freedman, Gayle Hamilton, Janet Quint.
Maine: *Final Report on the Training Opportunities in the Private Sector Program.* 1988. Patricia Auspos, George Cave, David Long.
Maryland: *Final Report on the Employment Initiatives Evaluation.* 1985. Daniel Friedlander, Gregory Hoerz, David Long, Janet Quint.
Supplemental Report on the Baltimore Options Program. 1987. Daniel Friedlander.
New Jersey: *Final Report on the Grant Diversion Project.* 1988. Stephen Freedman, Jan Bryant, George Cave.
Virginia: *Final Report on the Virginia Employment Services Program.* 1986. James Riccio, George Cave, Stephen Freedman, Marilyn Price.
West Virginia: *Final Report on the Community Work Experience Demonstrations.* 1986. Daniel Friedlander, Marjorie Erickson, Gayle Hamilton, Virginia Knox.

Other Reports on the Demonstration of State Work/Welfare Initiatives

A Survey of Participants and Worksite Supervisors in the New York City Work Experience Program. 1986. Gregory Hoerz, Karla Hanson.

Welfare Grant Diversion: Lessons and Prospects. 1986. Michael Bangser, James Healy, Robert Ivry.

The Subgroup/Performance Indicator Study

A study of the impacts of selected welfare-to-work programs on subgroups of the AFDC caseload.

Subgroup Impacts and Performance Indicators for Selected Welfare Employment Programs. 1988. Daniel Friedlander.

The WIN Research Laboratory Project

A test of innovative service delivery approaches in four Work Incentive Program (WIN) offices.

Job Search Strategies: Lessons from the Louisville WIN Laboratory. 1983. Carl Wolfhagen, Barbara Goldman.

The Self-Employment Investment Demonstration (SEID)

A test of the feasibility of operating a program to encourage self-employment among recipients of AFDC.

Self-Employment for Welfare Recipients: Implementation of the SEID Program. 1991. Cynthia Guy, Fred Doolittle, Barbara Fink.

Programs for Teenage Parents

The LEAP Evaluation

An evaluation of Ohio's Learning, Earning, and Parenting (LEAP) Program, which uses financial incentives to encourage teenage parents on welfare to stay in or return to school.

LEAP: Final Report on Ohio's Welfare Initiative to Improve School Attendance Among Teenage Parents. 1997. Johannes Bos, Veronica Fellerath.

The New Chance Demonstration

A test of a comprehensive program of services that seeks to improve the economic status and general well-being of a group of highly disadvantaged young women and their children.

Lives of Promise, Lives of Pain: Young Mothers After New Chance. Monograph. 1994. Janet Quint, Judith Musick, with Joyce Ladner.

New Chance: Final Report on a Comprehensive Program for Young Mothers in Poverty and Their Children. 1997. Janet Quint, Johannes Bos, Denise Polit.

Parenting Behavior in a Sample of Young Single Mothers in Poverty: Results of the New Chance Observational Study. 1997. Martha Zaslow, Carolyn Eldred, editors.

Project Redirection

A test of a comprehensive program of services for pregnant and parenting teenagers.

The Challenge of Serving Teenage Mothers: Lessons from Project Redirection. Monograph. 1988. Denise Polit, Janet Quint, James Riccio.

The Community Service Projects

A test of a New York State teenage pregnancy prevention and services initiative.

The Community Service Projects: Final Report on a New York State Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and Services Program. 1988. Cynthia Guy, Lawrence Bailis, David Palasits, Kay Sherwood.

The Parents' Fair Share Demonstration

A demonstration aimed at reducing child poverty by increasing the job-holding, earnings, and child support payments of unemployed, noncustodial parents (usually fathers) of children receiving public assistance.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Caring and Paying: What Fathers and Mothers Say About Child Support. 1992. Frank Furstenberg, Jr., Kay Sherwood, Mercer Sullivan.

Child Support Enforcement: A Case Study. Working Paper. 1993. Dan Bloom.

Matching Opportunities to Obligations: Lessons for Child Support Reform from the Parents' Fair Share Pilot Phase. 1994. Dan Bloom, Kay Sherwood.

Low-Income Parents and the Parents' Fair Share Demonstration: An Early Qualitative Look at Low-Income Noncustodial Parents (NCPs) and How One Policy Initiative Has Attempted to Improve Their Ability to Pay Child Support. 1996. Earl Johnson, Fred Doolittle.

The National Supported Work Demonstration

A test of a transitional work experience program for four disadvantaged groups.

Summary and Findings of the National Supported Work Demonstration. 1980. MDRC Board of Directors.

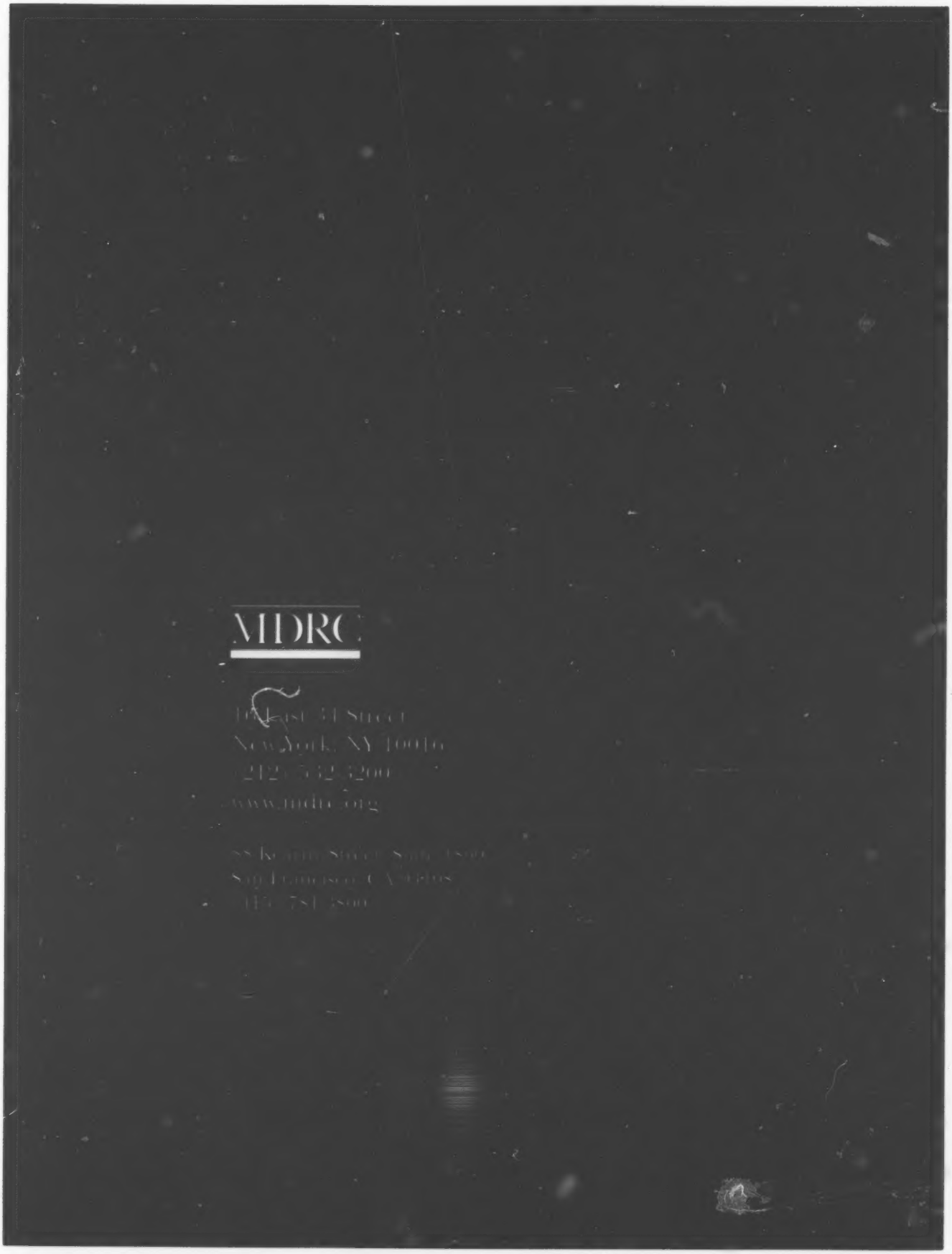
The Section 3 Study

Lessons from the Field on the Implementation of Section 3 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research). 1996. Maxine Bailey, Suzanne Lynn.

About MDRC

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) is a nonprofit social policy research organization founded in 1974 and located in New York City and San Francisco. Its mission is to design and rigorously field-test promising education and employment-related programs aimed at improving the well-being of disadvantaged adults and youth, and to provide policymakers and practitioners with reliable evidence on the effectiveness of social programs. Through this work, and its technical assistance to program administrators, MDRC seeks to enhance the quality of public policies and programs. MDRC actively disseminates the results of its research through its publications and through interchanges with a broad audience of policymakers and practitioners; state, local, and federal officials; program planners and operators; the funding community; educators; scholars; community and national organizations; the media; and the general public.

Over the past two decades — working in partnership with more than forty states, the federal government, scores of communities, and numerous private philanthropies — MDRC has developed and studied more than three dozen promising social policy initiatives.



BEST COPY AVAILABLE